

Advocacy Today, Advocacy Tomorrow, Advocacy Forever!

by John Moorman

John Moorman is particularly well qualified to write about being an advocate for libraries. Since 1975, he has been the top library administrator of public libraries; a multi-type library system; and library systems in North Carolina, Texas, Illinois, and Virginia. Active in both state and national library organizations, he has served as Illinois American Library Association Chapter Councilor, president of the Small and Medium-Sized Libraries section of the Public Library Association, and has served several terms on the Board of Directors of the Public Library Association. Moorman is currently a member of the ALA Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship, serves on the ALA Council as the representative of the Intellectual Freedom Round Table, and is vice president/president-elect of the Virginia Library Association.

Advocacy is a matter of perennial concern for today's librarian and the library community as a whole. For example, in the January–March 2008 issue of *Virginia Libraries*, Donna Cote started her president's column with several paragraphs highlighting the need for each of us to be advocates for our libraries and to support the work of the association's Legislative Committee as well as ALA's national legislative efforts. As Cote said, we need to remind our elected officials that "We speak on behalf of the 4.2 million Virginians who hold library cards."

In another notable instance of proactive leadership, current American Library Association President Camila Alire's initiative "Frontline Advocacy" is designed to provide both the tools and the motivation to deliver the library message to those who play a role in funding

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libraries at all levels. Readers can explore Alire's program at http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/advocacy/advocacyuniversity/frontline_advocacy/index.cfm.

As one who has been actively involved in library advocacy in four states for over thirty years and is a registered lobbyist with the Commonwealth of Virginia, I know that without ongoing advocacy, libraries have no hope of receiving the resources that they need to provide quality services to their user communities.

I want to distill what I have to say about library advocacy down to eight tips. These tips are not original, but borrow from a variety of sources and individuals encountered over the years. I view them as essential parts of the advo-

cacy experience. As you approach library advocacy, whether as a trustee, friend, community member, or one whose livelihood is library-based, keep these in mind for every encounter—however short it may be.

The first and most important tip is **Be Honest**. Give the unvarnished facts and use figures and examples that reflect actual usage or user experiences. If you do not know the answer to a question, admit it and indicate that you will get back to them when you have researched the question and arrived at the answer. Then do it! There is nothing worse for establishing a long-term relationship with an official than giving inaccurate information or exaggerating or embellishing information.

The second tip is **Be Courteous**. Whether the legislator or local government official agrees with your views is beside the point. Courtesy is instrumental to assuring that you will always have an opportunity to present your concerns to your elected and appointed officials. As a part of being courteous, always thank individuals afterwards for their willingness to give their time to visit with you.

The third tip is **Be Uncritical of Others**. You never know what relationships officials have with each other. During any visit, concentrate

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on the individual with whom you are meeting. Avoid being drawn into comments about others unless they are supportive. If you cannot say something positive about someone, keep your mouth shut.

The fourth tip is **Be Understanding**. Know where the individuals you're visiting come from. Understand their backgrounds and what drives them. Listen to what they have to say and seek to find common ground. This can at times be very difficult. However, it is essential if you are to have success in developing long-term relationships with elected or appointed officials.

The fifth tip is **Be Succinct**. Time is valuable to both you and the individuals you meet. Know your subject, be brief, and be gone! You will be appreciated and remembered for the manner in which you conducted your visit.

The sixth tip is **Be Persistent**. Advocacy is not a one-time operation. Do not be discouraged. Keep communication channels open, put officials on lists to receive library newsletters and information about upcoming programs and services, and invite them to important events. Get to know legislative assistants. These individuals are valuable contacts and should be cultivated. Make sure that you personally visit with officials at least one time a year and contact them on other occasions when new information or concerns arise.

The seventh tip is **Be Available**. When your state library legislative committee (or other library organization on either a local or national basis) asks your assistance in contacting legislators, talking to local government officials, or coordinating user input into the political process, respond with a "Yes." Even if all it means is sending an email message to one of your elected officials, this is very important. Advo-

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cacy cannot be done by the few for it to succeed. Advocacy is a participatory event, and for it to work all of us must be players rather than sideline sitters.

The eighth and final tip, while it should not be, is often viewed as a controversial one. I call it **Be Giving**. By this I mean when you find legislators at any level who are supportive of or open to library issues, be willing to assist them with your money and your time. Contribute to their campaigns, attend their special fundraising events, and work with them as they run for office. This is how politics works, and if we are to be considered serious players, we need to be present and accounted for.

Advocacy is essential if librar-

ies are to be able to succeed in the twenty-first century. This is true for all types of libraries. As you advocate for your library, or assist others in library advocacy, whether it is school, public, academic, or special, make sure that you are fully aware of the community the library serves, are knowledgeable about its needs and services, and can effectively relate to the individuals and entities that fund the library why this funding is important. Decision-makers are constantly bombarded by individuals promoting a wide variety of issues and concerns. Each of these is of vital importance to the individual promoting it. For library advocacy to stand out in this crowd of ideas and concerns, our story must be relevant, concise, and well presented, and the presenters must be known and respected by those with whom they come into contact.

I acknowledge that there are individuals who occupy positions in libraries where, due to local government restrictions, library advocacy by library staff must be conducted on a very limited basis. Often this is restricted to contacting lobbyists for the governmental entity to convey to them what concerns the library would like to see addressed. In this case, find others in your community who can effectively advocate for you and your institution. ■