

Defining Advocacy and Lobbying



Defining advocacy

Habitat defines advocacy as “**efforts to influence policies and systems to create a world where everyone has a decent place to live.**”

Public policies shape how housing is built, financed, accessed and maintained. They determine what gets built, where and for whom, and determine how resources are distributed across communities. Habitat affiliated organizations engage in advocacy to transform public policies at the local, state, and federal level so more people can access decent, affordable homes.

Advocacy activities are wide ranging and can take many forms. Below is a list of potential advocacy activities your affiliate or affiliate support organization (ASO) might be engaged in. Please note that this list is not meant to be exhaustive:

Developing solutions to housing needs:

- Conducting or supporting policy research on housing issues and/or solutions.
- Identifying, proposing, endorsing, or opposing public policy solutions.

Connecting with policymakers:

- Building relationships with policymakers.
- Meeting with policymakers to discuss housing issues.
- Inviting policymakers to events.
- Making asks of policymakers and monitoring outcomes.

Partnering with community:

- Participating in and/or convening coalitions to advance shared priorities.
- Supporting impacted community members in engaging in the policymaking process.

Spreading the word:

- Incorporating advocacy issues into public communications plans and speaking engagements.
- Leveraging media coverage and/or social media to influence the public and policymakers.

Motivating supporters to take action:

- Rallying supporters to advocate.
- Hosting an advocacy training or event.
- Engaging in nonpartisan elections activities, such as educating voters through candidate engagement, ballot measure advocacy, or sharing of election information.
- Launching issue-based or policy-focused advocacy campaigns.

You can learn more about Habitat’s advocacy and find additional resources to support you locally in the [U.S. Advocacy](#) collection on the MyHabitat Knowledge Center.

501(c)(3) compliance

Advocacy is an essential part of how Habitat builds homes, communities, and hope and is critical for Habitat to engage in to fulfill our mission. It's important to note that as a network of nonprofits, each 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization engaging in advocacy work must stay in compliance with all federal laws and regulations applicable to 501(c)(3) organizations, as well as all local and state laws applicable to nonprofit organizations. Understanding these limitations is important before you begin engaging in advocacy.

What is “always” allowed*:

- Educating the public, media and policymakers about housing needs and solutions.
- Hosting nonpartisan candidate forums or public issue discussions.
- Building and participating in coalitions focused on housing or community development.
- Conducting and sharing research, data and homeowner stories.
- Raising public awareness about the need for affordable homeownership.
- Submitting public comments on general issues without advocating for or against legislation.
- Encouraging civic engagement in a non-partisan manner (e.g., promoting voter registration or encouraging attendance at public meetings).

What is allowed within limits:

- **Lobbying**, which is defined as attempts to influence legislation, either directly asking policymakers to support or oppose specific legislation or through grassroots efforts of encouraging the public to communicate with policymakers to express support for or opposition to specific legislation.

This includes:

- Asking an elected official to vote for or against a bill.
- Urging the public to contact lawmakers about a specific piece of legislation.
- Taking a clear position on a pending bill, ordinance, referendum, constitutional amendment or regulation and encouraging action.

Please note: General education about issues, sharing research, raising awareness and advocating for broader policy change without referencing specific legislation is not lobbying and is generally allowed for 501(c)(3) nonprofits.

What is always prohibited:

- Endorsing or opposing candidates for elected office.
- Contributing money, resources or services to political campaigns, PACs or political parties.
- Using any federal financial assistance, including grant funds, for lobbying (unless explicitly permitted by the grant).

* These activities are generally allowable by tax-exempt entities, but the facts and circumstances surrounding the activity could cause it to cross over into lobbying activities (which are still allowable by tax-exempt entities within limits), such as if the activity includes mentioning or taking specific positions on specific bills, or if the event occurs during an election cycle and a candidate's position on or ballot initiative is pending regarding the topic of education.

In addition, be aware that state and local laws vary widely, and could be more restrictive.