ADVOCACY 101
MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN CONGRESS
Why Advocacy?

Working to end hunger in our nation and world can seem overwhelming. After all, hunger is a massive, complex, age-old human struggle. What can one person do?

Providing direct assistance to hungry and poor people through churches and charities is vital. It feeds many families in immediate need and gives people hope for the future. But even if churches and charities doubled their efforts, they still would not be able to end hunger on their own. Our federal government must play a role. Only government leaders can make the economic, social, and political decisions necessary to attack the deep structural causes and ultimately eliminate widespread hunger and poverty. Just a sentence or two written into a piece of legislation can benefit millions of people in the United States and around the world.

As people of faith and conscience, we must remind leaders of their responsibilities to the people they represent and offer constructive solutions. We can advocate for changes in public policy that will end hunger and poverty at home and abroad in the decades ahead. Advocating with and for hungry people is something each of us can do, and it doesn’t take

Advocacy works

Kristin Ostrom had mobilized Bread for the World members and coalition allies for years, urging their local representative to support hunger programs. When a key vote to significantly cut SNAP (formerly food stamps) loomed in the House of Representatives, the Lincoln, Neb., Bread leader rallied faith leaders across the state to speak out. Her representative became one of only 15 members of his party to vote against the cuts.

Two other Bread activists, Chuck Gerhan and Thato Ramoabi, live in New Hampshire. When they learned that their senator was an important swing vote on extending unemployment benefits for people unable to find work, they spoke up. They took talking points that Bread staff provided and, along with other advocates, made a timely call to the senator’s office. She voted in favor of Bread’s position. Later, the senator’s staff said that calls from constituents back home changed the senator’s mind on the legislation.
a lot of time. It just takes the will to act and speak out. Even though the political process in Washington can seem challenging, we remain hope-filled and confident that our voices will make a difference, as they have through the years.

**Does Advocacy Work?**

Recent research by the Congressional Management Foundation confirms that advocacy makes a difference. Virtually all of the Capitol Hill staff surveyed (96 percent) reported that if their member of Congress had not reached a firm decision on an issue, individualized letters and emails would influence the member’s position. Individual phone calls are also very effective as are letters to the editor and op-eds in your local newspaper. Scheduling a visit with your member of Congress in a district office can be the most effective of all. Or schedule a conference call with the representative or senator and other Bread members.

The key to effective advocacy is to make your communications personal and individual. A recent survey found that *it takes only seven letters* for a congressional office to start “tracking” (paying attention to) an issue.

**What You Can Do**

1. **Pray**

   Ask God:
   - to support and comfort our brothers and sisters who live with hunger, poverty, and disease
   - to help our nation’s leaders make wise and compassionate decisions
   - to guide people of faith and conscience on their journey to do justice and love mercy
God may call you to action in your prayers. Turning faith into action engages a community in God’s reconciling, healing work. Bread for the World provides prayer resources that can create a space for prayer for and with people who are hungry and poor. These free resources are at www.bread.org/pray.

**Communicate to Congress**

Studies show that handwritten, mailed letters and personalized emails are the best way to communicate with your members of Congress, other than at face-to-face meetings (see #5). A personal touch distinguishes your letters and emails from mass-mail campaigns. Social media is increasingly effective as an advocacy tool. Members of Congress are taking advantage of social media to learn what constituents think and to communicate their positions to people back home.
Tips for your communications to Congress:

• Include both your postal and email addresses in correspondence, especially in emails. Members of Congress often reply by regular mail or email, and your postal address helps identify you as a constituent.

• Personalize your message. As one House correspondence staff person put it, “One hundred form letters have less direct value than a single thoughtful letter generated by a constituent.”

• Be informative. Tell your members of Congress why this issue is important. Draw on your own experience and knowledge to make the letter your own.

• Be concise. Letters, emails, and other social media messages do not have to be long or elaborate to make a difference. Express your request clearly in one or two paragraphs.

• Request specific action. Bread for the World’s website or your regional organizer can give you our current position on an issue and message to Congress. When possible, give the name of pending legislation or specific bill numbers.

3 Hold an Offering of Letters in Your Congregation, Campus, or Community Group

What’s even better than a personal letter to Congress? A collection of personal letters to Congress! Among the variety of issues Bread for the World addresses each year, the topic of its annual Offering of Letters campaign is chosen to enable churches, campuses, and groups to take effective, collective action on key legislation to reduce hunger and poverty. You can involve anyone—young children, older folks, immigrants, food pantry recipients and volunteers. Everybody—all ages and congregation members and non-members alike—have a voice to share with elected leaders.
Bread for the World provides resources to help people who are new and those experienced in holding an Offering of Letters. These include tips for organizing a letter-writing event, sample letters, posters, a video that shows how our advocacy leads to concrete improvements in people’s lives, and more. In addition, your regional organizer can offer advice, materials, and connections to other Bread for the World members in your area.

See the Offering of Letters website at www.bread.org/ol for the latest materials.

When Is the Best Time?

Any time is good to communicate with your member of Congress. Writing or holding an Offering of Letters in early spring is particularly effective to urge legislators to introduce and cosponsor hunger-related bills. Key budget decisions are also made relatively early in the year. Congressional staff report that letters from constituents are “particularly helpful or influential early on in a decision-making process, when members and staff are researching and developing policy positions.” But useful letters can be sent at any time during the year. Visit Bread’s website at www.bread.org to get the latest updates on the issues currently before Congress and what message you can send that will have the most impact.

After you write a letter or hold an Offering of Letters, it’s helpful to follow up as your legislators reply and as more policy and budget decisions
are made. See the chart (on page 9) for key steps in the legislative process. Moreover, you don’t have to rely only on letters. Repeated phone calls, emails, and visits can be particularly powerful.

- Once a bill is introduced, you have an opportunity to urge your senators and representative to cosponsor it.
- You can thank them for their support once they sign on.
- It’s useful to recommend improvements in the bill’s provisions as it is considered at the subcommittee or committee levels. This is particularly true if your member of Congress is on the committee that has jurisdiction over the bill.
- With major issues, like the recent budget debates, Congress does not always follow a normal legislative process. Legislation may not be introduced until a couple of days before it is voted upon. Your communications to Congress even during the early negotiating period can be especially critical in these debates.
- There are other chances to recommend changes or urge a bill’s passage or defeat when votes occur on the House and Senate floors.

Quick-Response Alerts

When events are unfolding rapidly on Capitol Hill and mailed letters may be too slow, phone calls, emails, or social media communications can make a difference. Bread for the World sometimes schedules call-in days or sets up action alerts to let particular legislators know of our position on a pending decision. These are quick, easy, and effective ways to take action. Sign up to receive urgent Bread alerts at www.bread.org/alerts.
Visit Your Members of Congress

Visiting a member of Congress in person can have a lasting impact. Whether at local offices, during Bread’s annual Lobby Day or other visits to Washington, D.C., or at public events, personal contact is often persuasive. Although it is tempting to try to address many issues during your conversation, focusing on one or two main points to discuss is usually more effective.

For example, Rev. Libby Tedder Hugus of Caspar, Wyo., attended a Bread for the World Lobby Day in Washington during her training as a Hunger Justice Leader. She met with her senator, Dr. John Barrasso, and shared not only Bread’s policy perspectives but also that she had served him coffee at a café where she worked as barista in Caspar. So he, in turn, served her coffee in his office. Later, the senator happened to be at the church where he heard Libby preach and conduct an Offering of Letters. Those connections laid the groundwork for Bread staff to have a successful meeting with the senator, a top policy leader in the Republican party. All of this started because a single activist met face-to-face and developed a relationship with her senator.
This chart shows the official way proposed legislation is enacted into law. Many bills, however, do not become law because their progress is stopped somewhere during the process—in committee, on the floor of the House or Senate, in conference, or by presidential veto.
The legislative process can be very complex, and it is important to distinguish between “authorizing legislation” and “appropriations bills.”

- Authorizing legislation establishes and renews programs, often changing the program’s structure. These bills may outline a possible funding level.
- Yearly appropriations bills are what actually fund most programs through the annual budget process.

For example, members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees wrote a farm bill that authorized $80 million for local and regional purchase for international food aid. But the Appropriations Committees determine whether to allocate the full $80 million or less toward the program.

In recent years, “regular order” for legislation has been more of the exception rather than the rule. Heightened partisanship and gridlock in Congress has led to fewer and fewer bills making it through the legislative process. Instead, top congressional leaders often negotiate last-minute agreements behind the scenes. These big deals are then unveiled and quickly ushered through passage with little opportunity for amendment.

Advocacy with your members of Congress is still very important in this new way of operating. If your member of Congress is in a leadership role or heads a committee, he or she has a very powerful voice in shaping legislation. Congressional leaders constantly assess the collective stance of their parties, counting supporting and opposing votes. If your senators and representative have heard from you, they can approach the leadership in their party or Congress and push a particular priority before or during these negotiations.

Resources and Tips on Effective Advocacy

Check out Bread’s website at bread.org
Bread for the World is a collective Christian voice urging our nation’s decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad. By changing policies, programs, and conditions that allow hunger and poverty to persist, we provide help and opportunity far beyond the communities in which we live.

God’s grace in Jesus Christ moves us to help our neighbors, whether they live in the next house, the next state, or the next continent. Food is a basic need, and it is unjust that so many people must go without enough to eat. We can end hunger in our time. Everyone, including our government, must do their part. With the stroke of a pen, policies are made that redirect millions of dollars and affect millions of lives. By making our voices heard in Congress, we make our nation’s laws more fair and compassionate to people in need.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

- Visit the Bread website (www.bread.org) for legislative updates and resources for action at church, at home, on campus, or in the community.
- Visit www.bread.org/organizers or call 800-822-7323 to find the name and contact information of your Bread for the World regional organizer, who can offer advice and put you in touch with other Bread activists in your area.
- Order or download copies of the Biblical Basis to End Hunger from the Bread website.