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FAQs on Grassroots Advocacy

At first glance, grassroots advocacy may seem like a daunting task; the information provided below will show you that advocating for affordable housing is actually much simpler than you think, and your unique perspective on affordable housing issues could enhance the message that NAHMA presents to the government and the public.

Q: What is “grassroots advocacy” and why do I need to be involved?

A: The term grassroots advocacy describes people contacting their Senators and district Representatives about important policy issues. It involves people asking elected officials to take a specific policy position or to vote a certain way on a specific piece of legislation. It is important that affordable housing owners and managers become involved because you provide real-world experience that supports NAHMA’s overall message.

Q: If NAHMA is my advocate in Washington, why are they asking me to get involved?

A: NAHMA aggressively advocates on behalf of management agents and owners who provide affordable rental housing. But grassroots advocacy is a partnership. Among the first questions NAHMA staff are asked in legislative meetings are: “How does this affect my district;” “How many NAHMA members are in my district;” or, “Who can I talk to in my district?” By getting involved, you provide the (voting) human element that moves housing issues from concept to reality for members of Congress.

Q: If I participate in grassroots advocacy, does that make me a lobbyist?

A: No. The definition for Lobbyist under federal guidelines is as follows, and all three conditions must be met: any individual (1) who is either employed or retained by a client for financial or other compensation (2) whose services include more than one lobbying contact; and (3) whose “lobbying activities” constitute 20 percent or more of his or her services on behalf of that client during any three month period. Engaging in grassroots action campaigns is an exercise of your right as a U.S. citizen to petition an issue before your elected state representative/senator.

Q: Can a 501c(3) organization participate in grassroots advocacy efforts?

A: Yes. But before a 501c3 organization becomes involved in direct lobbying, the organization must determine how it will measure its lobbying limits. You may read more about the role of 501c(3) organizations in grassroots advocacy through this report: [AHMA 501c\(3\) Organizations and Their Role in Advocacy](#)

Q: I don’t know who my elected officials are.

A: Each state is represented by two U.S. Senators. In addition, there are U.S. Representatives (also known as Congressmen) who represent specific districts within that state. To find out who your Congressional Representatives are, please visit:

Senators: http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

U.S. House of Representatives: <http://www.house.gov/writerep/>

NAHMA Maps: <http://www.nahma.apartmentsmart.com/>

Q: How do I get in touch with my Senators and Representative?

A: E-mail and telephone contact are the best ways to reach congressional offices. Most members of Congress have websites which include contact links for constituents (residents of their state or district) to send them e-mail. Their telephone numbers may also be found on these websites. Once you've identified your elected officials, and accessed their websites, the rest is easy!

For more information on contacting your Congressional Representatives, please visit NAHMA's grassroots website <http://www.nahma.org/content/grassroots.html>.

When calling the legislator's office, you should ask to speak to the legislative staff member who handles affordable housing issues. The staff member may be unavailable when you call, but you may ask to leave a voice mail message or for their email address. If you want to schedule a meeting face-to-face with your senator or representative, you must first contact the legislator's scheduler. Another great option is to have your senator/representative personally visit your property. The legislator can see first-hand the quality community development that affordable housing provides, and this may better inform their position or opinions of affordable housing programs.

For assistance in scheduling a visit with your elected officials, either in DC or at one of your affordable properties, please contact Scott McMillen, NAHMA's Coordinator of Government Affairs, at scott.mcmillen@nahma.org.

Q: I asked to meet with my Senator/Representative, but I only got to see the staff. Wasn't this a waste of time?

A: NO! Members of Congress rely on their staff to advise them on important issues. They depend on staff to know policy details—the pros, cons, who supports legislation, who opposes it, and most importantly—how a vote will affect their districts. The staff act as gatekeepers for the legislators, so building a relationship with the office through the staff member can improve the effectiveness of your advocacy efforts.

Q: I have an appointment with my representative and their staff. What do I say?

A: Detailed talking points on important housing issues are available on NAHMA's grassroots advocacy website, located here: <http://www.nahma.org/content/grassroots.html>. The most important message to share is how a policy will affect the representative's constituents. You may discuss how policy could affect the services you provide, the residents who live in your properties, or how reforms in certain pieces of legislation could improve affordable housing programs. NAHMA members may also contact NAHMA staff to help prepare.

Q. I don't actually live in Congressman X's district, but our company has a property there. Should I contact them?

A: Yes! Even though you may not personally live there, your property may be considered a "constituent company." Therefore, the Congressman's positions on affordable housing policy will affect the property—as well as the tenants who are living and voting in the district. You may use [NAHMA Maps](#) to find the number of affordable housing properties in a Congressman's district to enhance your message.

Q: My senator/representative does not support my position. Why should I waste my time with them?

A: Occasionally, you will be disappointed by a member's position; but unless an official's views are challenged, there will never be a reason for them to reconsider. Also, your advocacy could change the opinions of new members elected to Congress who may have never examined the benefits and positive qualities of affordable housing. Becoming familiar with a newly elected official through advocacy may cause them to vote differently on issues once you inform them of the real-world effects.

Becoming involved in grassroots advocacy is easy! As you will discover, many NAHMA members participate in grassroots advocacy because they understand the values and impact it has on our overall industry. Resist feelings of discouragement after a piece of legislation you have supported and advocated for does not become law. When you think about legislation, think long-term – bills introduced in Congress may not pass the first time they are presented, but your advocacy can increase awareness and support. Finally, when you visit Capitol Hill, NAHMA can help tailor your message and assist you in arranging meetings.