

What can one person do?

30 Action Steps

People ask where they can start addressing the systemic causes of poverty. Here are some ideas:

1. Understand: Advocacy has an important place alongside charity. Writing a \$50 check to a local program or an international relief effort can benefit people in need; writing a letter to an elected official can help leverage millions of dollars. We can be good stewards of our gifts of money – and also good stewards of our gift of citizenship. One church distributed grocery sacks and, paper-clipped to them, information on a hunger issue, an envelope, and paper. They asked people to take two actions to feed the hungry: bring back the grocery sack filled with cans, and write the letter to a lawmaker.

2. To influence a legislator, phone calls and letters may be better than e-mails. Petitions and form letters aren't usually effective. The rule of thumb is this: Lawmakers assume that the amount of time you spent indicates how much you care about the issue. Taking a few minutes to write a note shows more interest than taking ten seconds to sign a form letter. (Note: There may be other reasons to run a petition campaign.)

3. If possible, ask for a specific action on specific legislation. It's not usually effective to say, "Please do something to help homeless families." Legislators may talk a good line about their concern for people in need, but it's harder to dodge a specific request, such as, "Please vote for House Bill 212 when it comes before the Commerce Committee."

4. Join an organized group. Advocacy groups decide on issue targets and then organize lots of people to achieve a win. When their newsletter or website educates you about an issue, you can get more out of news coverage of that issue. Advocacy newsletters or listservs may track the issue better than newspapers do.

5. Letters to the editor double your effect. Not only do you help to educate the public on this issue; you will probably also catch the attention of your lawmakers.

6. Invite a speaker. Groups like Arise have organizers whose job it is to get people started in advocacy. Arrange for a speaker for your organization, your committee, your Sunday School class – or a special evening program for your congregation or even in your home.

7. Attend a lobby day. Some advocacy groups have annual lobby days when scores of constituents gather at the State House to visit their legislators. The advocacy group holds a briefing on an issue, then everyone fans out to find their legislators and make their case persuasively and concisely. There may be time to sit in the gallery and observe the legislative process – which can be illuminating. (Hearing the arguments lawmakers make, you may realize that you know the issue better than they do.) Note: Some groups will put together a lobby day for you and one-to-three others.

8. Greet your lawmaker in the street. When one Arise member said, "We need to get 10,000 people down to Montgomery to show we mean business," a state senator replied, "If each senator had one person come up to him on the street to discuss the issue, that would have more effect than 10,000 at a rally in Montgomery." It's not always necessary to greet your legislator with an issue in your mind. The big-money lobbyists know it's all about relationships. (Oh yeah... and also money.)

9. When you read an especially good op-ed (or letter to the editor or article), clip it and send it to your legislator. This shows that there's a constituency for that point of view in your district.

10. Find natural allies. Good organizing starts with your strengths, so it's okay to "preach to the converted," that is, to start with people who already sympathize and build from there. Share information about the issue and the advocacy organization. We need to spread the word about Alabama's advocacy groups and the best sources of information.

11. Share issue information with your minister/priest/rabbi, especially if he or she is not familiar with the organization. He or she may be looking for examples of root causes of poverty.

12. Set up an e-mail group so that you can share urgent action alerts. Your e-mail program probably has a way you can define a group so that you can get the alerts out quickly.

13. Invite your legislator to meet with a group in your home. This makes sense if you have a number of people who care about the issue and have done their homework.

14. The key to successful events is the telephone. A mailing or an e-mail posting doesn't produce the same turnout unless the group is highly committed. A person who is willing to phone dozens of people is probably a prize organizer.

15. An Alabama Arise listening session is a good way to involve new people. Invite an Arise organizer to a summer meeting of existing and prospective Arise members. The evaluation and give and take of ideas is unusual and, we hope, appealing.

16. In cities or along district lines, you can help people determine who their state representative and senator are. A single congregation in a city can have members from a dozen districts. The easiest way to find people's district is to go to the "Zip Code Look-Up" at the Legislature's website: www.legislature.state.al.us .

17. Brainstorm who else should be involved. Come up with a list of groups and congregations you can visit. You can invite them to a reception and invite a staff person to tell them about the advocacy group.

18. Rehearse for your meeting with a legislator. Decide who will make which points, and make them concisely. Try to anticipate your legislator's concerns. Depending on how well you know each other and the issue, you might be able to do this in an hour over coffee before the meeting.

19. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." You have the right and responsibility to participate in our democracy. You don't have to be an expert ... but you should do your homework. You're likely to know more about some issues than some legislators know.

20. Remember the value of stories to help people connect. Personalize the issue – don't just quote numbers! How does this issue affect my family or people in my community?

21. Help find real-world stories of people affected by the issue. Advocacy groups need people who are willing to tell their stories to reporters and even legislative committees.

- 22. Help spread the word about coming events.** Be the person who knows good opportunities and lets people know. Better yet, each member of your group can volunteer to track an issue or advocacy group.
- 23. Bring the food for an event.** Relationship-building is an important part of organizing, and cookie-bakers are valued only slightly below the telephoners in our value scale.
- 24. Furniture matters.** A group that is too informal may get down to business if they meet around a table. A task-oriented group that needs to build relationships may need to sit on sofas and chairs in someone's den.
- 25. Join a listserv.** Several Alabama advocacy groups can keep you informed by e-mail. (And some will overwhelm you. Don't join too many listservs!) Sign up for Arise's list at www.arisecitizens.org.
- 26. Recruit an advocacy accountability buddy.** Many of us intend to make that phone call, but we put it off. The idea of the action accountability buddy is that after an action alert comes, you check with each other to see if each other have called or written promptly.
- 27. Find out if your statewide faith community is in partnership with advocacy groups.** Sometimes a local congregation isn't aware that the bishop is involved, or the diocese has joined. Several state leaders are getting their faith communities more involved.
- 28. Launch an effort to get your congregation or group to join an advocacy group.** Some congregations welcome coffee-hour letter-writing; others will schedule a special program. Ask our staff for advice.
- 29. Give money!** It's difficult to persuade foundations to support advocacy groups. Since your financial support can leverage million-dollar changes in government policy, please include advocacy in your giving mix.
- 30. Register to vote and vote.** Voting is a very important way to have your voice heard in the policy making process. It is your opportunity to choose your elected official. Therefore, find out where candidates stand on the issues and vote your conscience.
- 31. Help others register to vote.** Many votes represent many voices. You can help others have their voices heard in the policy making process.
- 32. Work on an election campaign.** Once you identify a candidate you can support, help them get elected. This also helps you to hold them accountable after they are elected.