



The Key

ASSISTANCE REPORT

Focus on **LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY**

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

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WHEN LAWS HIT HOME

Martha Ortegon served 10 days in a Texas jail for a minor drug offense in 1998, then returned to the home in which she had lived since she was 3. In her early 30s now, she had inherited the house when she was nineteen and her mother died. In the years since, Ortegon had struggled with bipolar disorder and cocaine addiction, and her life had changed a lot. Her husband was gone now, she lived with only one of her two sons, her career as an interior designer was over, and she badly needed income. But she was clean, and she had a house—a permanent home that was hers. Free and clear.

Too depressed to work, Ortegon applied for Social Security and Disability benefits and waited for approval. Meanwhile, the tax bills came, and she couldn't pay them. So the warnings followed.

"I got a letter from the county that said I owed back taxes," she explained, "and that I needed to come up with the money or they were going to auction off my house."

Threatened with homelessness, Ortegon sprang into action. She gathered documents showing that she owned her home, that she had a disability, and



Photo provided by the National Mental Health Association

Hazel Moran (forefront) and others rally on Capitol Hill for legislation to require insurers to provide equal coverage for mental and physical disorders. The 2002 event was sponsored by several mental health consumer advocacy organizations.

that she had applied for assistance. She took the papers to the tax assessor's office and described her circumstances to a worker who showed no sympathy.

"She really went off on me," Ortegon recalled. "She said, 'I know people with bipolar and you can work and that's not really an excuse.'"

So Ortegon took her case a step further. She wrote to the tax assessor to complain about her experience in the tax office, and

to condemn the county's threats.

When the official received the letter, she invited a surprised Ortegon to meet and discuss possible changes to the county's policy of taking homes from people like her.

"She told me it was a coincidence (that she received the letter) because she was working on the issue for the elderly," Ortegon explained. "She realized that she was leaving a whole group of people out, people with disabilities."

The meeting led to Ortegon's first foray into the political arena. Her five-minute testimony at the next Texas legislative session contributed to the passage of a law in her county that protects elderly and disabled people from losing their homes when they can't pay their taxes.

TAKING ACTION

Ortegon's experience is unique, but her story demonstrates that current and former consumers of behavioral health services can and do impact public policy. Testifying at hearings is one of many ways to raise legislators' awareness of mental health issues. Some advocates work independently, as Ortegon did when she wrote to the tax assessor, and some people join groups and/or coalitions, as Ortegon eventually did.

The most prominent groups are the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), which advocates for consumers and their families, and the National Mental Health Association (NMHA), which addresses all aspects of mental health and mental illness. Both offer policy analysis and alerts to keep people abreast of pertinent legislative issues as they arise. The information appears at the organizations' Web sites, www.NAMI.org and www.NMHA.org, respectively; and both offer late-breaking developments via e-mail for those who register.

Many experts advise consumers seeking an advocacy group to learn about key issues and find an organization that shares their philosophy. Consumers should also keep in mind that they're not obligated to take a particular stance if they disagree with their group's position on an issue. Whether consumers choose to work alone or with a group, they should understand the legislative process, experts say. Lawmaking procedures vary among American states, commonwealths, territories and protectorates, but most systems echo that of the federal government.

A BARE-BONES RUNDOWN OF THE FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

- *Someone has an idea for a law and searches for a "sponsor." The term refers to a legislator who will advocate for the idea both in Congress and among the public. Sometimes lawmakers sponsor their own proposals to address issues important to their constituents.*
- *The sponsor puts the idea on paper and introduces it to the legislature. If no one there objects, the idea becomes a bill and is given a number by which it will be identified throughout the process.*
- *The bill goes to the committee that deals with related issues. This stage is very important because the bill must survive a vote here to proceed to the next step: either the Senate or the House of Representatives.*
- *If the bill passes muster in one of these 'houses' of Congress, it goes to the other for another vote. It will pass through various committees along the way.*
- *If the bill ultimately gains the support of the majority in both houses of Congress, it goes to the President. The bill*

becomes law if the President signs it. However, he can instead "veto" the bill—reject it in its current form—and send it back to Congress.

- *From here, members of Congress may change the bill and send it back to the White House in hopes that the President will approve the amended version. Congress may also drop the idea altogether, or vote to make the bill law without the President's approval. This results when the bill passes with a two-thirds majority in both houses.*

Bills are the subject of many votes and often go to many committees throughout the process. At any juncture, they may be rejected or altered in a way that causes one-time advocates or opponents to change their stance. Legislative alerts offer one means by which consumers can track these changes. Other resources include news stories, materials produced by groups that focus on disabilities issues, and information from lawmakers themselves.

Find Your Legislators:

Names and contact information for your representatives are available in the government pages of your phone directory or by following the links to Web sites for federal, state and local legislatures at the official United States government site:

www.FirstGov.com (English)

www.FirstGov.gov/Espanol (Spanish)

Track a Bill:

The Library of Congress provides legislative information and links to resources including up-to-the-minute updates from the House floor at <http://thomas.loc.gov/>.

TOOLS FOR ADVOCACY:

Sometimes lawmaking bodies hold hearings on proposed legislation during which consumers can testify—as Ortegon did—about what's at stake for them. This can prove effective, but may entail travel to distant state capitals and waiting for hours to speak for minutes.

Here are some other means by which consumers can influence decision-makers:

Write letters. Many legislators report that a concise personalized letter from a constituent carries more weight than any other form of contact. The most effective letters, they say, focus on one issue, provide key facts and describe the impact an action—or lack of action—will likely have on the author. Some advocates recommend neatly writing letters by hand so busy decision-makers know at first sight that the correspondence is not part of a mass mailing, which ranks much lower. Other advocates believe a typed letter that looks professional is more likely to sway a decision-maker.

Send Electronic Mail. Many decision-makers have e-mail addresses listed at their Web sites, but many have also indicated that they pay less attention to e-mails than to traditional corre-

spondence. However, e-mails with return addresses are favored over those without.

Schedule office visits. A consumer is a great resource for lawmakers and influential aides, who may know little about mental health issues. Face-to-face meetings can help dispel stereotypes and reduce stigma by showing that many consumers are literate, articulate, educated and empowered. The meetings also help constituents form long-term relationships with policy-makers that can keep them interested in mental health issues and lead to increased access when communication is crucial.

Tips for writing high-impact letters:

Communicate your message in one or two pages. Maximum.

Reference any prior communication to help the representative remember you.

Clearly state the action you want the legislator to take, and state it early.

Identify relevant legislation by official designations.

Keep it timely: Address issues that need immediate attention.

Include quick facts and figures that bolster your position.

Stay affirmative; don't badmouth the opposition.

Ask the legislator to reply and to state whether he or she supports your position.

Proofread what you've written.

Find someone else to proofread it again.

Arrange for site visits. Meeting representatives on their turf can go a long way, but many decision-makers and advocates contend that lawmaker visits to constituents go even further. Such visits put a human face on statistics and allow legislators to see first-hand what's at stake.

Easy Addresses

Name of representative or committee

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Name of senator or committee
U.S. Senate

Washington, DC 20510

The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Call. Advocates frequently get less than a day's notice before crucial votes. Telephone calls are the most immediate means of conveying support for or opposition to a bill that's on the table. If a legislator can't take your call personally, ask for the aide assigned to your issue. If the aide isn't available, leave a message with the person who answered the phone. If you can't get past a machine, leave a recorded message as a last resort. Some legislators check these frequently. Advocates can also record last-minute pleas to the current president through an automated White House Comment Line. This number will be disconnected when the president leaves office, and the next administration may or may not replace it.

Numbers to Note

Reach any member of U.S. Congress at (202) 224-3121

Leave a message for President George W. Bush at (202) 456-1111

Demonstrate and petition. Many advocacy groups organize these activities. They're important because they often bring attention to mental health issues and show that large numbers of consumers are committed to furthering their interests.

Vote. Few actions speak louder than voting non-sympathetic lawmakers out of office.

COMMON FEARS

Ortegon said she wasn't nervous about addressing the legislators in her state assembly, but she knows first-hand that many consumers would have been. She now volunteers for a group that aims to

help people overcome such fears.

The group, San-Antonio-based Prosumers, not only encourages people to approach their lawmakers; it arranges for groups to visit lawmakers in their offices every week for 'Legislative Thursdays.' The weekly meeting gives consumers the chance to tell their stories.

"We want to make people comfortable in going to their legislators," explained Janet Paleo, one of Prosumers' founders. Her partner, Anna Grey, added that the representatives also gain a resource. "We want to give our legislators more experts to interview," she said. "When (the law-makers) go to Austin and they need advice, they have someone to turn to."

Doug DeVoe, CEO of Ohio Advocates for Mental Health, recommends that advocates learn as much as they can about their representatives and contact them often.

"I encourage people to develop a relationship," he said. "It's about understanding what his interests in the world are instead of just walking in and talking about what our interests are and saying, 'I want, I want, I want.'"

Like Paleo and Grey, DeVoe encounters many consumers who are reluctant to meet lawmakers face-to-face. He said people commonly fear that they don't have formal enough clothes or that they won't explain their ideas well. He tells the consumers to wear something clean and nice from their own wardrobes. "Most people with mental illness live in poverty," he said. "It's not a problem to go in there and dress like you normally do." And, to bolster advocates' confidence that they can make their points articulately, the Ohio group provides mentors who help consumers craft concise messages and create one-page fact sheets that legislators can keep for quick reference.

DeVoe also stressed the importance of recording all correspondence, including dates and times of personal and phone contact, and copies of letters. He added that advocates should follow-up communications and policy actions by sending lawmakers thank-you's or polite expressions of disappointment, as appropriate.

"Treat them like people," he said. "They're not used to it."

Still have questions about legislative advocacy? Call the National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse at 1-800-555-4KEY (4539).



The Clearinghouse welcomes all programs in which consumers play a significant role in leadership and operation to apply for inclusion in its Directory of Consumer-Driven Service. The directory, accessible at <http://www.cdirectory.org>, is search-

able by location, type of organization, and targeted clientele, and serves as a free resource for consumers, program administrators and researchers.

Apply online at www.cdirectory.org/contact, via fax at 215-636-6312, or by phone at 800-553-4KEY (4539). To receive an application by mail, write to info@cdirectory.org or NMHCSH Clearinghouse 1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1100, Philadelphia, PA 19107.

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Clearinghouse Executive Director
Joseph Rogers

Clearinghouse Director
Christine Simiriglia

Editorial
Daniele Sadres
Susan Rogers

Design
Pamela Downes Lee,
Downes Designs

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Philadelphia, PA 19107

