

MLA Advocacy - August 24, 2017



Who needs advocacy?

An even more compelling question: Whose responsibility is advocacy? The simple answer to both questions is everyone. It gets a little more complicated when we try to sift down to our day to day lives, embrace the fact that we need to practice advocacy every day in our libraries, in our communities and in our personal lives and then try to determine how best to achieve it.

Before you say you don't get involved in politics, what we are calling advocacy and how you are already involved may surprise you. As you know, public libraries depend on millages, penal fines, state aid and myriad other sources of funding. What you may not realize is that for every dollar funneled into your library budget, someone advocated to see that funding was not taken away.

The lobbying done by MLA, lobby firm GCSI, MLA Legislative Committee and numerous engaged librarians has resulted just this year in increased state aid to libraries, relief from tax captures, continuing availability of the May, August or November ballot for library millage questions and the ability to communicate freely with your community.

This fall we will once again be fighting a legislative initiative that would force all millage proposals onto the November ballot. We fully expect another assault on free speech similar to SB 571 which earlier this year would have prevented libraries and others from communicating with their patrons for 60 days prior to an election. Additionally, we expect an attempt once again to sneak this in under the radar without full public review.

So working directly with legislators and the administration to secure positive results is one way to advocate. But advocacy starts well before MLA and GCSI meet with a legislator in Lansing. It starts with educating and building relationships.

Advocacy means educating key audiences on the value of libraries. The American Library

Association explains, "The recent rash of anti-library trends, including the anti-tax movement, privatization, removal of independent library boards and deprofessionalization, point to a systemic shift in our landscape." They describe it as an attack on libraries as a public service. This is why we're bringing you the ALA Advocacy Bootcamp in April. This training is for library staff, trustees and friends. It is presented by MLA in conjunction with the Cooperative Directors Association. The focus of the day-long work shop is on developing an advocacy plan you can implement in your library. It will empower librarians with skills to tell their library's story and secure funding and teach practical tips on how to be a respected and effective voice in your community - again this is all about building relationships.

In a very eloquent message to Jeff Bezos on why he should invest in libraries, Susan Crawford of Backchannel explained, "Today, libraries are serving as essential civic places. Trusted by every part of American society, they're the only noncommercial places other than city squares where people meet across genders and ages...They're places that offer classes in computer skills and thousands of other subjects, provide Internet access to millions of Americans who can't afford it, and host innumerable neighborhood meetings. Libraries these days are providing meals to kids and adults through local food banks, working with local immigrant agencies, offering homework help..."

Local and state elected officials, community leaders, and, yes, philanthropists need to be educated and reminded of the good work you do every single day. That's why advocacy is everyone's responsibility. Develop a relationship with your community leaders and elected officials and educate them. That is imperative. But don't stop there, tell your neighbor, your barista and the person who changes the oil in your car. It's all about community advocacy and it's what we'll be talking about in April and throughout the year.

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