November CAN Do Newsletter: How to Host an Advocacy Training Session

As CAN Coordinators, your role is twofold. On the one hand, you advocate for special/gifted education policies by developing good relationships with your congressional delegation through regular outreach and by attending the Annual CAN Meeting. While this is work is critical, it is equally as important to make sure that your network is up-to-date on the latest special/gifted education policies, and that they know how to become effective grassroots advocates.

And who better to instruct them? CAN Coordinators are masters of grassroots advocacy – letter writing, phone call making, relationship building fiends! So who better to pass along tools and tips for advocacy to your network than you?

There are several ways of passing along your advocacy tools and tips to your network. Whether by passing along newsletters like this one or writing your own or by referring your network members to CEC’s website, where we have a whole host of advocacy training tools, there are many opportunities to train your members in grassroots advocacy. However, nothing works quite as well as a training session. This gives the members of your network the opportunity to ask questions as they come up, to share their own ideas and interests, and to help your network get to know you better.

The tips and tricks in this newsletter mostly apply to hosting training sessions throughout the year. However, advocacy training sessions are an important part of your unit’s annual meeting or convention. By hosting a training session there, you gain valuable face-to-face time with your network to provide a highly interactive training session that includes policy updates from throughout the year. If you would like more information on hosting a training session at your unit’s convention or annual meeting, just give us a call!

So, How Do You Do It?

First, choose your platform! There are several options depending on how many people you will be hosting, what your own internet capabilities are, and how comfortable you are with new platforms. If you aren’t sure how many people will be attending, announce the training session first and then send out the participation information when you know what the best platform will be.

1. 0-12 attendees
   a. Skype: Skype is a free resource available to anyone with a computer and the internet. It is free to do a conference call assuming all members are also using Skype to connect. However, you also have the ability, for a nominal fee, to include people via phone by creating a conference group that includes both Skype usernames and phone numbers.
b. Google Hangout: this is another resource that is free to use, and works best with fewer participants. As with Skype you can use it for small meetings, particularly if you would like to be able to see those attending your session. Google Hangout has a slightly better capacity for video, which is also something to consider.

2. 12 – 40 attendees
   a. Free Conference Calling systems: There are a variety of them which you can find by searching for them online, and I’ve listed a few of these services below. Through this system you receive a number and a code. Everyone calls the phone number for the system, and then enters the code for your call. The free systems start to get a little buggy when you have more than 40 – 50 people on them. If your unit/division is willing to pay for a conference call line, you can have many more participants.
      i. http://www.freeconferencecall.com/
      iii. www.budgetconferencing.com/

3. 40 – infinity
   a. Livestream: The internet is a beautiful place. Though Livestream is a little more technologically intricate than the other services mentioned here, it is a highly effective method of reaching large numbers of people. You simply send everyone to your Livestream page and they can watch/listen to your training session live and ask questions through the chat box feature. For more information, please click here.

Second, plan an agenda! We have a couple of resources you can find here in the CAN Resources section of the website, but below is a rundown of a couple of different ways you can run your advocacy training section. Remember, that you want to train your advocates on how to be advocates in addition to providing them with the information they need in terms of legislative updates.

1. Introduction: Whether or not you get a lot of new members of your network on a regular basis, it’s helpful to hold a “New Advocates” training session every six months or so to introduce new members (or newly active members) to what kinds of advocacy opportunities are available for CEC members.

   An introduction to advocacy would contain two simple elements – an overview of issues, and an overview of advocacy. Since the people on the training session are new, you’ll want to keep to the basics, introducing your network to the tools available to them (Legislative Action Center, CEC’s Policy Staff, resources on the website, Policy Insider), a brief, concise overview of the issues, and the ways in which they can advocate on them. Make sure to leave plenty of time for questions, and provide your contact information at the end. Click here to view relevant resources.

2. Issue Specific Training: The Fiscal Cliff looms in our future. Advocacy on Sequestration is going to become a very important part of the next few months. As timely policy issues arise, you may want to consider doing an advocacy training session that is issue based. This type of session
would need to be pretty balanced between explaining the issue and providing guidance on how to be an effective advocate. Try not to overload your trainees with too much information! You want them to be informed and confident, but not overwhelmed. While you will want to give an overview of the policy issue, be sure make clear to them the specific “ask” and how they can contact Congress.

a. Example 1- Policy “Ask”: Please prevent sequestration from taking effect which will cut $1 billion from special education resulting in 12,000 special education jobs lost over 500,000 students with disabilities impacted.

b. Example 2 – Contacting Congress: Please personalize a pre-written letter on this issue which CEC has posted to the Legislative Action Center, which takes only minutes to email. Here are some things you should think about when you’re personalizing this letter.

3. Congressional Recess Training: We know that it’s hard to get to Washington to meet with your Congressional Delegation. However, throughout the year, members of Congress return home for various lengths of time and it is important that your network know how to take advantage of these opportunities. Just before Congressional recesses, particularly the month long recess in August, host a training session for your advocates that focuses primarily on getting meetings with their Congressional Delegation, and what to do in those meetings. Here are a couple of things to remember to include in this type of training session:

   a. Persistence! Remember that making appointments with Senators and Representatives can take time and persistence. Make sure your trainees know that they might need to call several times before they’ve made an appointment.
   
   b. What to bring to the meeting
   
   c. What you think they should cover – there may be a specific timely issue that they should cover, so be sure to bring that up if necessary.
   
   d. Personalization! Local success stories and experiences are the key to any meeting with a Congressional Delegation.

Third, give us a heads up! Don’t forget that you can contact CEC’s Policy staff at any point in time for updated information, to use our presentation slides or to get tips and advice for your training session. If you’re hosting one, let us know so that we can make sure that you have all the information you need.

And, as always, if you have any questions, comments or concerns, please email us at sarad@cec.sped.org or give us a call at 703-264-9498.