

**Social Workers as Lobbyists:
Bringing a Social Work Perspective to Bear on Lawmaking**

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“Can an acceptable balance be struck between the right of the people to pursue their own interests and the need to protect their own interests and the need to protect society from being dominated by one or more interests? (Berry, 1989, p.4)”

From the very beginnings of our government the question of balance between the good of all and the good of a few has been debated. Berry (1989) points to the work of James Madison in Federalist Paper No. 10, and the formulation and codification of our republican form of government in addressing the need for harnessing, but not purging special interests. Berry (1989) follows the pluralist path through the theorists of the 50’s and 60’s in exploring the place and importance of lobbyists. If the government is the “synthesizer of competing interests” (Berry, 1989, p.4), what is the role and function of the public interest lobbyist? And do social workers bring an ideology and set of skills that allow them to work for the public good? It is the contention of these authors that they do, and we will attempt to give our reasons with both a limited literature search into the generalities of lobbying, and through the stories of lobbyists we have interviewed.

What is lobbying?

The terms lobbying and lobbyist are derived from the space in which the activity of advocating took place. The lobby of the legislature was the place where representatives of interest groups or business concerns could attempt to cajole or coerce, or, perhaps, in that time, even bribe, members of the elected representative bodies for their support or vote on a particular issue. Lobbying has come a long way from its tainted past, although the profession still suffers from the residue of its ignoble history.

There are as many definitions of lobbying as there are authors on the topic of interest group politics. We believe that Berry's definition is an accurate description of the activity: "When an interest group attempts to influence policymakers, it can be said to engage in lobbying (1989, p.4)." This definition includes both direct and indirect lobbying. Direct lobbying can be categorized as direct communications that occur between persons acting on behalf of an organization and policy makers or their staffs (Scott, 1982); indirect lobbying refers to activities that attempt to change public opinion in hopes of thus influencing policy (Berry, 1989).

Lobbyists have many roles--they are important as political strategists, as contact people, and as liaisons (Scott, 1982). In direct lobbying, they are a major source of information on pending legislation. They serve on governmental commissions and boards, bringing their position to bear on the formulation of policy. Lobbyists furnish information to lawmakers that aids in drafting legislation- both data pertinent to the issue at hand and to the necessary political strategy to move it through the system to enactment. Their presence on advisory committees, which Scott calls "lobbying on the inside" (1982, p. 98) helps interest groups to frame issues for discussion, ensuring their perspective will be both heard and legitimated by their advisory status.

Lobbyists spend much of their day gathering and communicating information in relationships that have been cultivated and nurtured. They need to be both credible and visible (Berry, 1989; Mathews, 1982; Scott, 1982). They are only as effective as the accuracy of the information they provide and the truth of their words (Berry, 1989). They strive to maintain good relationships with lawmakers and their staffs-- the opponents of one day may be the allies of the next. Even, perhaps, when an issue is clearly partisan and it may be useful strategically to portray issue positions as dichotomous, there is great risk involved in doing so (Berry, 1989). Berry also suggests that lobbyists, by supplying accurate information and establishing a

reputation for integrity and credibility, “create a dependency” (1989, p. 83) in lawmakers for lobbyists’ counsel. Flexibility is important, and compromise is essential to lobbyists, as much of their work involves forming coalitions with other groups to consolidate brain power and political might, trying to secure the best deal for their constituencies, and maintaining good relations with lawmakers and their staffs.

Mondros and Wilson (1990) looked at three types of organizers, including grassroots, mobilizing and lobbying organizers, on the East Coast. They wanted to get a sense of who organizers were, what they brought to their positions as organizers, and why they stayed with their careers. They suggest that organizers choose the field and remain in their positions as organizers because of congruence between their needs and expectations about the work. Mondros and Wilson (1990) also propose that organizers share a political analysis and position—one contrary to political power defined by the free market. Ideology, according to this research, appears to play a large role in lobbyists’ choice of career path, and ideology appears to merge comfortably with the organizational values of their employers. Mondros and Wilson (1990) speak of the “resiliency of organizers to blend their own beliefs, motivations, and goals with pragmatic organizational solutions (p.103).”

Of lobbyists involved in the study, 41% had as a change goal the desire to effect substantive change, and 31% wanted to foster leadership and a sense of efficacy in others to effect change. The main professional and personal charge of lobbyists in this study was to effect social change; their daily work was consistent with their guiding philosophy (Mondros & Wilson, 1990).

Berry, in 1999, added a contemporary perspective to his 10-year-old work, and suggested there was evidence for the ascendancy of a “new liberalism” (p.1). This liberalism is, according

to Berry, of a postmaterial nature- more predicated upon culture and lifestyle than the allocation of resources. In seeing interest groups as ‘policy maximizers’, as opposed to political parties as ‘vote maximizers, Berry proposes that citizen interest groups have challenged the corporate behemoths and created a popular and legislative legacy that will be “highly enduring” (p. 165). This argument, therefore, implies that the role and function of the lobbyist is even more important.

Who becomes a lobbyist? -- assorted paths, common goals

Many of the sources in our review of the literature offered information about the types of skills and personal attributes of effective lobbyists. There are, of course, skills and aspects of personality that may be important for those who lobby on behalf of public interest groups that may not be as important to those that lobby on behalf of corporate clients, and vice versa. We will address ourselves to the first, public interest lobbyists, as the social workers we interviewed were, and are, engaged in lobbying for public interest groups.

Berry (1989) cites experience and expertise as essential to lobbying. Good research skills and command of facts are important in analyzing and synthesizing important policy information and in communicating it effectively to policymakers. Scott (1982) suggests that lawyers can bring a particular set of skills which include familiarity with legal language, interpretation and analysis to bear on their lobbying efforts, and that this toolbox can help to make them effective lobbyists.

Mondros and Wilson (1990) speak of the fit of ideology and purpose in the activity of lobbying, and the importance of both technical competence and interpersonal skills. They also looked at the importance of training in the selection of a career in organizing. Of all organizers,

approximately 65% stated that their education was directly related to their careers as organizers, and of those, seven were MSW's and one, a BSW (Mondros & Wilson, 1990). Thirty eight percent cited a graduate field placement as their first foray into organizing. Of all organizers, about half had training which went beyond the formal educational experience; about 46% of those who identified as lobbyists said the same.

According to Pagliaccio and Gummer (1988), a lobbyist should be a good strategist and tactician, and able to identify resources that are valuable to a policymaker, especially when the goals of lobbyist and policymaker do not mesh. And when goals do agree, a lobbyist needs to be a good communicator, able to use persuasion to effect teamwork. They suggest,

The worker who wishes to influence legislation must be a person of consequence, credible and consistent in his or her arguments, rich in information resources, and capable of earning legislators' attention and respect by mobilizing and organizing people and events. Although the worker must ensure that the legislator that public recognition of his or her achievements will occur, the worker must also clearly state his or her expectations on behalf of people in need (p. 161)

Why Social Workers?

The paragraph above, from Pagliaccio and Gummer (1983), refers to lobbyists of a certain background- social workers. In their article for *Social Casework*, Pagliaccio and Gummer are speaking of attributes that social workers must have to effectively lobby at the local district level. Taking into account the many skills a lobbyist must possess, there are few professions as well suited, we argue, as social work.

In many articles on political social work, we found support for our argument. Social workers address the ills of society, including the ‘-isms’, that we face individually and collectively. Social workers experience through their client’s lives the fallout or benefit from policymaking. Social workers believe and practice in a way consistent with their belief that social problems “can be significantly ameliorated or contained through governmental intervention, enlightened social responsibility on behalf of corporations, and an informed, politically active citizenry (Patti, 1983, p. 99)” Lobbying is one way to effect change in the political arena, a path for which social workers are well suited.

Mathews (1982) spoke with legislators with respect to the effectiveness of social workers in the political arena, and the “ development of personal relationships was mentioned most frequently, then letter writing, then providing knowledgeable input.” These are skills that all social workers should work on, but are also skills that lobbyists and social workers share. If social workers are indeed trained in developing relationships and in the skills of information gathering and analysis- through techniques of need assessment and research- then these skills are transferable to the arena of political influence. Mahaffey (1987) makes the point that...

Social workers learn early that power involves information, resources, communication, and expertise...Social workers have proven skills in helping people. The leaders of people’s organizations use scientific methods of problem solving, as well as skills to mediate disparate perceptions of priorities to agree on action in their common self-interest. These skills are essential for creating sound public policies, effective institutions, and important resources to better meet human needs and achieve individual potential (p. 285).

Social workers are taught to do complete and cogent needs assessments and can offer

this skill, as well as the ability to synthesize information into credible and complete packages, to policymakers (Pagliaccio and Gummer, 1988).

Fisher (1995) makes the point that political social work training, in order to prepare students to enter the political realm, needs to be comprehensive. According to Fisher, there is a need to combine more extensive theory work on economics, social structure, and politics with directed application. Training needs to include opportunities to integrate coursework with reality by enhancing fieldwork to offer students experiences in many areas of intervention.

Social workers, by virtue of the Code of Ethics, are bound to engage in activity that fosters the growth of all and the good of society, reframing private troubles as public issues. Lobbying can be a natural extension of that ideological bent and for some social workers, a worthwhile career path. In fact, for the women we spoke with, this was the case.

Judy Blei

Judy Blei, a lobbyist with her own firm since 1990, lobbies on behalf of many public interest groups—Planned Parenthood, Connecticut National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL), Connecticut Sexual Assault Coalition (CONNSAC), the United Way, the American Academy of Pediatrics, National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the Alliance for a Healthy Connecticut (an anti-tobacco group), Mobilized Against Tobacco for Children’s Health (MATCH), the American Heart Association, and Literacy Volunteers of America. She also monitors legislation for groups such as the League of Women Voters.

Judy completed her MSW studies at University of California- Berkeley in 1971, and graduated from the University of Connecticut School of Law with a JD in 1986. As a graduate

social work student, Judy majored in community organization and policy, doing her field placements at an agency involved with alcohol and substance abuse attached to the County Health Department, at Alamedans for a Better Community, and at a neighborhood organizing group in West Oakland affiliated with the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

To understand Judy's ideological stance and commitment to social justice, we need to look at her beginnings in Berkeley in the late 60's and during the 70's- a time of protests against the war in Vietnam, a time of the Great Society programs, a time of both unrest and promise. In her CO sequence cohort of 25, there were only three white women- most of the class was African American and Latino, and there were a few white men who were ex-priests; everyone was "involved in grassroots politics".

Judy recalled that the issues of economic injustice were at a full boil- poverty and housing issues were of great concern. Berkeley was "the place to be as an organizer", as public issues fomented and people took up the banner of social justice. Her graduate professors were "four white guys" whose teachings, while important at a certain time, were not relevant to the times. The atmosphere at the School of Social Work was quite "contentious" with free flowing discourse that often resulted in either students or professors walking out on meetings.

Judy moved to Connecticut, and from 1973 until 1975 worked at Connecticut Citizen's Action Group (CCAG) as the Citizen Lobby Coordinator, using what she had learned in her education and placements on the grassroots level. After having children, Judy moved to Planned Parenthood in an administrative capacity, and continued to nurture her interest in policy.

Wishing to continue her education in the policy realm, Judy entered law school and learned the intricacies of crafting and interpreting policy. She had no interest in practicing the law, per se, but in using her legal expertise for the public good in the policy arena.

Her fieldwork placed her with Betty Gallo, where she honed her relationship skills and sharpened her ability to assimilate complex policy information. In 1990, she opened her own firm.

Judy sees a “strong connection between ideology and lobbying” and asserts that “you don’t lobby for anything you don’t care about”, a connection cited in a good deal of the literature about public interest lobbying. She believes that social workers bring a “set of values that are different than the values of non-social workers”. An important point that she addressed was the popular image of social workers as “bleeding hearts”, and how that image was something for social workers to grapple with. Judy shared, “The popular assumption that social workers are bleeding hearts and don’t understand the world, or only understand it in a way that is not shared by others, may be something that social workers need to address.”

She recounted an incident when working with Betty Gallo on nursing home issues. Trying to lobby in opposition to a bill, she approached a legislator and was told, “I’m a lawyer” with the underlying text that a social worker wouldn’t “get” the issue up for debate. As an attorney and a social worker, she countered with “I’m a lawyer, too- so I guess I’ll understand it.” She went on to say “If I said ‘I’m a social worker’, I may have been dismissed. I bring a set of values, social work values that people respect and some people in government share, but not all do. It’s a perspective that needs to be heard. We would be all better off if it was.”

When asked what makes lobbying different from community organizing, Judy offered this distinction in approach to policymakers “In the legislature, let’s say we had a NASW questionnaire and got information back from legislators. We have information that on an earned income tax credit bill, she voted against it. I’d be sorry and disappointed, but I’d be nice. On the other hand, the group I’m working for could plaster her name all over.” This story illustrates the

command of strategies of compromise and relationship maintenance that are necessary. Lobbyists need to be able to fight another day- organizers can remain more 'pure' in their actions, yet both approaches are valid and both are needed for social change.

Judy spoke of the "inside-outside game" that she and Hillary Russell of NASW, Connecticut chapter, choreograph. Hillary organizes the constituent group, while Judy keeps the communication going inside- monitoring the status of bills, talking to legislators and their staffs, speaking with other like-minded groups. As Judy says, they "respond differently to situations. Hillary keeps membership informed of what I find out on the inside. And vice versa."

We spoke about social work education. Judy believes that a gap exists between the academy and the world, and that it is easier for students to do the academy thing and wait to be called upon. "It takes organization, political action; it takes lobbying to get change. Economic justice is social justice. A lot of social workers are getting it, and they should be recognized. Part of it is that field placements are limited in terms of time and don't have regular hours. The hours are not conducive for political lobbying work, as the current 20 hour week stands."

We spoke about electoral politics and whether Judy had any desire to seek elective office (which she doesn't). "In order for people to get reelected people have to make compromises. I'm not sure I want to make compromises. Miles Rappaport is the first to say that he was dialing for dollars. I don't like asking people for money. I'm a 'white hat' lobbyist, that's where I'm effective."

Tanya Rhodes-Smith

Tanya received her MSW from the University of Connecticut one year ago. Prior to starting the MSW program, she spent ten years working as a management consultant. Her major

method in the Social Work program was policy and planning, with a minor method in administration. She feels that she choose her second method “out of convenience” due to her previous years working in management.

Her first field placement was at the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, where she is now presently employed. Her second placement was at the school’s Institute for the Advancement of Political Social Work Practice. At this placement, she was also secondarily placed with a legislator in Hartford, but says she did not gain much from this experience, as it was the legislator’s first term. He was very busy trying to learn the system himself, and did not have much time to direct interns. These combined field placements gave Tanya some political experience when she entered her job at the Child Advocacy Coalition, but she had no experience in lobbying. Lobbying is something that Tanya feels can only be learned through experience. She has gone to some training workshops on how to actually lobby, but feels that the majority of what she has learned has been on the job.

When asked what she felt about her social work training specifically helped her to prepare to lobby, she felt that her work in the policy and planning method was the most crucial – “it was absolutely relevant”. She feels that to be a good lobbyist, one needs to understand legislation from a policy level. Bills need to have political feasibility. She gave an example of the Coalition to End Child Poverty, another lobbying group that she is familiar with. The Coalition is sponsoring a 2% excise tax for income over \$150,000, and propose using this fund to end child poverty. While this goal of ending child poverty is something every social worker would like to see happen, from a policy standpoint, this bill includes neither program outlines nor specifics as to how the money will be spent, and so is not politically feasible.

Basic social work values have also been very helpful to her. “Social work helps you to understand how people got to where they are at, it takes the judgment out of looking at welfare moms and instead makes you look at how they became single moms”. It also helps her to look at things in perspective. For the Earned Income Tax Credits, policy analysis has been done, and the maximum a family can get is \$400 a year. This may not seem like much, but it is a great deal to many poor families. One of the costs that Tanya identifies to being a social worker and a lobbyist is that as a lobbyist, sometimes you need to make compromises that you aren’t always comfortable with, and you need to learn to take the small victories. We then discussed that this is really a problem for all social workers in all areas, not just for political social workers. Social workers need to learn how to choose their battles, and know that their advocacy efforts will not always be seen positively.

Tanya’s position at the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition is a contracted position- she is not a staff member. She lobbies for child welfare issues but does not see herself as a pure lobbyist. “Some lobbyist spend 90% of their time at the Capitol; my work has much more of a community organizing bend to it”, she says. Her major responsibility is to form action networks, where she signs up Fairfield residents who are willing to support the coalition. When an important bill comes up, she contacts the people on her list and asks them to contact their legislators to support the bill. She may have 400 people on her list, and considers a 20-25% response rate to be very good. This builds a suburban base of support, and also provides the additional power of having voters contacting legislators. Legislators may take calls from voters much more seriously, as lobbyists are expected to lobby and push for support of certain bills, but voters are the people who put the legislators in office. One of Tanya’s biggest accomplishments was the last time the bill for Earned Income Tax Credit came up, two legislators voted against it.

The next time the bill came up, they changed their vote and voted for EITC. Tanya credits this change to the citizen action networks that she has formed.

She enjoys her job as a lobbyist because it offers her the flexibility she needs in order to be available to her family, and she also mentioned something not often heard when social workers discuss their jobs. She feels that lobbying pays her a good wage which takes into account her skills and education. Although wages are something social workers don't often discuss, it is an important issue, because salary can often reflect the kind of respect employers have for a position, and how worthwhile social workers themselves may feel about their positions.

As a political social worker, one of the biggest gaps that Tanya identified was the need to bring together social workers of all methods to advocate within the political system for clients. She spoke of the large numbers of social workers presently working, and that if we could politically involve all those people we would have a much greater impact on legislation. We discussed the barriers in getting casework method social workers involved, and of the general need for social work education to include political awareness and political action.

One of the more frustrating things for her has been that she feels the political system really excludes citizen participation. When she began her work as a lobbyist, she tried to testify in person, but would spend all day at the Capital and never get called. She decided a better system would be to submit written testimony so it is on public record, and then convert that testimony into letters, which she sends to committee members.

Tanya feels that one of the most important things about lobbying is "to stay grounded in reality; you need to stay connected with the people". For Tanya, this means volunteer work. Her concern is that any kind of advocate can lose sight of reality and glorify their position, or

exaggerate the facts. She gave an example of her boss at the Coalition saying that in the housing market, there are 50 people applying for every apartment available. The reality is that there probably aren't 50 people applying, and there is harm in not correctly representing the facts. Advocates can get caught in a "the boy who cried wolf" situation where they aren't believed if they don't accurately represent the facts.

When asked if she would ever consider running for political office, Tanya says that she has considered running, and is planning to join the democratic town committee. Her reluctance at this time stems from her personal need to only work part time, and to maintain her job flexibility.

Katie Martin

Katie Martin is a first year social work student at UCONN whose block fieldwork placement is at the Connecticut chapter of NASW. Her major method is Community Organization, her minor method, Group Work. Katie also works part time with Judy Blei, doing "footwork" for Judy and Carolyn Treis-Logan, allowing Katie to spend most of her days engaged with political issues.

Katie believes that social workers, acting in concert with their Code of Ethics, are bound to advocate on behalf of their clients, be it on behalf of individuals or collectivities. "Especially in making decisions regarding taxpayer money," Katie shares, "Who better than social workers to have a say where it goes? Government controls the monies going to agencies, where social workers provide services. It's that whole social justice perspective of social workers that needs to be brought to bear on the decisions of who gets what. A key to what is going on is

that social workers operationalize the decisions made by legislators, and they need to hear how it will affect the clients.”

Important personal attributes that Katie believes she brings to her position, as a lobbyist is the ability to be both visible and assertive. She believes that one “can’t be shy about being in people’s faces.” She also a thought about “personalizing situations”, as putting a human face on an issue is an important tactic in the lobbyists’ toolbox. The real costs and benefits of pending legislation, obscured by legal language, can be communicated through the stories of the people whose lives will be affected and the people that provide social services.

For lobbyists, there is great importance in knowing the personal history of people they are trying to influence, especially during testimony in the public hearing environment. “Who’s asking the questions of people testifying? And what are they asking?” Katie also spoke of how her physical challenges and suggested that “being in a wheelchair is a unique dynamic” in that it is a distinguishing characteristic and, perhaps, useful in identification.

Katie spoke of the importance of accurate information. “With about 5000 bills a session, lobbyists provide essential information to legislators. You need to be an expert in what you’re addressing, to be able to articulate the key points, take care of the details by making sure they have a copy of the bill, making sure they have the information to make a good decision.”

Katie believes that the key to effective lobbying is credibility. “Building up your credibility is essential. Money always talks, but in the scheme of things, there are ways of working around that and being effective. Credible information is most important.”

In the middle of her educational experience, Katie could easily see links between her social work training thus far and her fieldwork experience. She believes that “the skills of engagement” she learned in the classroom and in the field helped her to create the personal

relationships so essential to her effectiveness. In Community Organization I, Katie recalled that the class spent about half of a class bloc on lobbying per se, not so much addressing specific technique as a discussing a general overview of the process. She believes that “the in school experience deals with political work at the Legislative Office Building (LOB) at a high level” and that specific tactics come along with experience.

While Katie thought that most of the skills she acquired were most easily learned on the job, she thought that the curriculum might be enhanced with the “exploration of the dynamics of lobbying, perhaps with more role playing opportunities, even in the classroom situation.” And she suggested a further improvement. “It would be helpful to learn the process of testifying, to be more aware of what it entailed.”

Katie was quick to respond to the question of whether or not she would consider seeking elective office. “I would work a campaign,” she added as she mulled over the idea. “I worked on Senator Handley’s campaign; I would help someone to run, but run myself? I wouldn’t want that level of scrutiny.”

Conclusion

Some common themes have become apparent in the histories of these women and what they identify as being important to their jobs as lobbyists. All women see that being lobbyists trained as social workers is an important piece of what they do. Social work training uniquely qualifies them to see social issues in a certain light, and provides them with skills to not only identify problems, but also relationship skills to help them with dealing with legislators. Both Judy and Katie majored in Community Organizing, while Tanya majored in Policy and Planning (Judy also includes policy as part of her training). In their training as social workers, they learned about the importance of advocacy on behalf of their clients. They learned to look at the

environmental face of a problem instead of pointing blame towards those disenfranchised by the system. They learned about identifying solutions to problems, and the importance of looking at the feasibility of those solutions. They learned to listen to those who are powerless, to hear their stories, and to bring those stories to light.

Another common theme was staying connected to the people that you are lobbying for. Both Tanya and Katie spoke of the need of putting a face on problems, not just for the legislators they are lobbying but for themselves also. Legislators need to see the human side of the bills they pass, and what the effects are on their constituents. But lobbyists also need to stay grounded in reality, and to see the real people that they are advocating for. Otherwise, there is a risk of becoming desensitized to the issues, or to fight for issues that reflect your own ideology and not necessarily the needs of those you lobby for.

One more common issue is that of credibility and providing accurate information. In order to obtain credibility, it is very important to make sure you present the facts accurately, and not overstate figures or exaggerate. Those who do this run the risk of being found out and losing their credibility. Tanya also mentioned the “boy who cried wolf” syndrome. Once you become known as a lobbyist who exaggerates the facts to put his/her proposal in a better light, the chances of legislators listening to you on an important issue becomes very slim.

Lastly, the social workers brought up the issue of making compromises. As social workers, these women all share a set of values that are very important to our profession. At times they need to make compromises that they are not always in agreement with, which is something all social workers should be familiar with. Compromise means that they may only get a piece of what they’re lobbying for, but they all know that they need to choose what battles are worth fighting and which can be won. Social workers are not always at ease with compromises,

because somehow we feel we have given up some of our integrity in the process. Social workers who go into lobbying need to be realistic and know that not every bill will be passed, and that there will be times where a compromise is better than a loss.

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