

Improving Community Health through Advocacy

By Kayla Wagner, The Governance Institute

Advocacy is an increasingly important responsibility of hospital and health system board members. Many public policy issues affect healthcare organizations daily: declining reimbursement rates, health equity, access to care, workforce shortages, cybersecurity, and patient rights, just to name a few. How these issues are handled can have a tremendous impact on a hospital or health system, its patients, and the community at large.

Yet, in The Governance Institute's biennial survey, community benefit and advocacy consistently ranks as one of the lowest-adopted and lowest-performing core board responsibilities.¹ While board members may appreciate the benefits of advocacy, they are often unclear of their role and how to rank advocacy initiatives among their growing list of priorities. This article highlights board members' key leadership role in advocacy and the powerful influence they can have in their communities.

Set a Culture of Advocacy

Advocacy is the act of "taking a position on an issue, and initiating actions in a deliberate attempt to influence private and public policy choices."² While lobbying might be the first activity that comes to mind for boards,³ advocacy efforts go far beyond this to include educating others, relationship building, forming and joining coalitions, and communicating about meaningful issues.⁴

Creating an organizational culture of advocacy sets the tone for prioritizing this work and the impact it can have on community health. This starts with leadership, according to Amanda Pears Kelly, Chief Executive Officer of Advocates for Community Health. "The C-suite needs to be in agreement that advocacy is a priority," she shared. "If you don't have a top-down approach, meaning if your senior leadership hasn't fully bought into the need to prioritize advocacy, it's not going to go anywhere." The CEO plays a critical role here, not only in advocating themselves, but in encouraging board members to regularly discuss and engage in these efforts.

KEY BOARD TAKEAWAYS

- Set a culture of advocacy from the top by sharing how leadership is invested in advocacy aimed at improving community health.
- Make advocacy a standing agenda item at every board meeting.
- Conduct a relationship inventory with the board to identify any connections they have that could help advance advocacy initiatives.
- Utilize advocacy to drive the organization's mission and strategic plan.
- Prioritize causes that are the most meaningful to the organization and community, and where the board and senior leadership feel they can have the biggest impact.
- Educate board members on their role in advocacy as well as why the organization is taking a stand on specific issues.



Pears Kelly also recommends having advocacy as a standing agenda item at every board meeting, so it is always top of mind. This provides reoccurring opportunities to discuss current advocacy efforts and any new issues where the hospital could have a positive influence. Many board members are leaders in the community, so someone sitting around the table may even have a connection they can reach out to or an event they are attending where they can build relationships or highlight the hospital's work around a specific cause.

Link Advocacy with the Mission and Strategic Plan

Considering advocacy as a driver of the organization's mission puts it front and center as a key board activity. If the hospital's mission focuses on offering high-quality care, improving community health, and/or providing equitable access, that provides a foundation for advocacy efforts.

The board should also consider how advocacy connects to the strategic plan. "Advocacy should be a part of achieving the organization's strategic plan," Pears Kelly said. "If you think about where

the organization is headed and what the things are that are going to be necessary to achieve that, advocacy is typically one of them. Then you need to take it a step further and decide what that means for your organization. Does that mean you are trying to influence policymakers? Does that mean developing more relationships? Many different tactics go underneath it, but you have to have that roadmap, that North Star, with advocacy as a part of it."

Prioritize Where to Focus

The board and senior leadership should focus on areas of advocacy where they feel they can truly make a difference. Key causes to target could include:

- Climate change and its impacts on health
- Health equity
- SDOH/community health needs specific to their organization and communities
- Substance abuse disorder
- Mental/behavioral health access and affordability

Along with picking topics that align with the mission and strategic goals of

1 Kathryn Peisert and Kayla Wagner, *Think Bold: Looking Forward with a Fresh Governance Mindset*, The Governance Institute's 2023 Biennial Survey of Hospitals and Healthcare Systems.

2 Sana Loue, "Community Health Advocacy," *The Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, June 2006.

3 501(c)(3) organizations are subject to a limitation on their lobbying activities. For more information on this, see *Advocating Legally: Privilege or Curse?*, Elements of Governance, The Governance Institute, 2006.

4 Community Commons, "An Introduction to Advocacy as a Change Strategy for Non-Profits."

the organization, the board can look to the community health needs assessment, which has already identified the most-pressing community health concerns and gaps, backed by data and community insight.

Dr. Archelle Georgiou, a physician, consumer advocate, consultant, and the immediate past chair at Children's Minnesota noted the need for boards to zero in on the topics and outcomes that matter most. "The board, along with the executive team, needs to come forward with focused objectives for their advocacy efforts. You have to really pick your priorities," she said. She agrees that the CEO can be an empowering influence. For example, years ago, the Children's Minnesota CEO came forward with a passion for health equity and he brought this to the board with a rationale for why this was important to address—highlighting that it was the right thing to do but there was also a strong business case for these efforts.

The board and CEO aligned around advocating for health equity, and the CEO brought in an experienced executive leader to create the operational infrastructure to move these efforts forward. "Advocacy doesn't start and stop in the boardroom," Georgiou said. "Advocacy and a commitment to health equity and social equity is wired throughout the organization." There is a team that monitors, measures, and is the voice of health advocacy but execution of programs spans throughout the organization.

At the governance level, the Children's Minnesota board does discuss advocacy at every meeting. Leadership provides a report addressing progress around advocacy and equity efforts and the board reviews the health equity dashboard. This ensures the board is always part of the advocacy conversation and can do its part to support this work.

To gain clarity on and comfort with their role in advocacy, board members need regular opportunities for education. Advocacy education should start during

orientation and then continue with deeper dives on specific areas of advocacy, how those connect to the hospital and community, and where the board can help make a difference. Georgiou highlighted that education is especially important with advocacy around hot-button issues, such as gender-affirming care or gun control. She recalled when their board first started discussing the need for advocacy around gun control: "There were both board questions as well as employee questions about why the CEO of the organization was taking on a political issue. But our CEO really stepped up and addressed the questions very publicly at all levels of the organization, including the board, and shared data about how guns are one of the biggest risks to the health of children. When he reframed why he was taking that on, everybody was aligned. And it wasn't a political issue. It was a health of children issue."

Take Action

Once it is clear what to advocate for, there needs to be a plan for how to get the message across. Every organization's advocacy plan will vary but board support is key. For some this may mean direct involvement or backing the CEO and other stakeholders in everything from engaging with policymakers to working with local partners to sharing the organization's efforts with the media or at community events.

Board members can be powerful messengers for sharing the organization's community health initiatives and also telling the organization's advocacy story and connecting that to fundraising. Pears Kelly highlighted two areas where the board can play a valuable role here:

1. In addition to telling the organization's story, board members can tell their personal story about their connection to the hospital. Why are they serving on the board? Why is it important to them?
2. Involve the board in collecting stories and identifying individuals who have

powerful stories to tell that help support advocacy causes and may compel others to fundraise or give to the hospital.

Community events are one example where this opportunity exists. "Community events are great for raising awareness around community health initiatives, but they can also be an opportunity to say, 'This is the advocacy work that the hospital is doing. Did you know that, and would you like to participate?'" said Pears Kelly.

Boards can also work behind the scenes to support advocacy efforts. For example, Children's Minnesota regularly advocates for access to mental health

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services for its pediatric population. "While mental health is not the biggest moneymaker in healthcare, and especially pediatric healthcare, the board supported a big investment in expanding pediatric mental health services with an inpatient unit in our Saint Paul hospital," Georgiou said. "It did that because there was such a need for better access and to advocate for that. We have to be financially healthy, but we absolutely invest in those areas where there is a lack of access, and that lack of access disproportionately affects individuals that are disadvantaged."

Board members have the power to help drive their organization's advocacy efforts. Through this work, boards can support and amplify visibility around the issues that matter most to the organization and will ultimately have a positive impact on the health of their communities.

TGI thanks Amanda Pears Kelly and Archelle Georgiou for sharing their insight and experience for this article.

