

# How do I talk about PUBLIC HEALTH ADVOCACY?

## A community member's guide to getting started

As public health allies, we all have a role to play in teaching, training and advocating for issues of public health importance. Uniting our voices is an effective way to support public officials in making evidence-based decisions on health policy, but navigating the process can be tricky! We asked an expert at the Gillings School for tips on how to get started.



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### STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR CAPACITY.



**Advocacy can take many forms.** Think about what skills, knowledge or experiences you can contribute — and what your capacity is to contribute them. Can you write emails or provide transportation? Are you good at organizing? Do you have a compelling story to share? Does your public health knowledge lend itself to a particular issue? Whatever your contribution may be, there is a place for it.

### STEP 2: DO YOUR HOMEWORK.



**If you are very passionate about an issue, chances are, others are, too.** Find a way to get plugged into existing groups so you can best apply your skills instead of trying to do it all or duplicating the efforts of others. Existing groups typically have defined policy goals and understand strategies that are most effective for creating change. Many are also led by those with lived experience who are most impacted by policy or lack thereof.

### STEP 3: BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.



**Relationships are key to mobilizing support.** Understand the value you can provide to others, whether that be through education, skills or storytelling. Learn who is being impacted and bring diverse voices into your coalition. Partner with those who have complimentary skills, connections or influence and can establish trusting, friendly relationships with organizations or legislators.



Check out a recent Gillings School Inclusive Excellence Community Conversation on "Public Health Advocacy: Gun Violence Prevention as a Public Health Issue," which includes Dr. Ciara Zachary! [go.unc.edu/ie-convos](https://go.unc.edu/ie-convos)

### STEP 4: SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS.



**Making progress on policy can happen quickly or very slowly.** Expectations that are clearly defined ensure that, when progress moves slower than anticipated, you can maintain energy in a movement, overcome challenges and address concerns of partners who provide resources.

### STEP 5: DETERMINE YOUR BRIGHT LINE.



**A bright-line standard is your way of setting boundaries.** Many aspects of policy involve compromise, so it's important to identify areas where concessions are acceptable — and where they're not.

### ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- **Practice self-care.** Learn when to step away and take a break before you burn out or become discouraged. Connect with friends who can encourage you, especially when setbacks happen.
- **Learn the difference between advocacy and lobbying.** While the two actions have overlapping goals, they are not always the same. Advocacy is a broad term that involves raising awareness, educating and supporting programs and policies. Lobbying involves directly urging a lawmaker to take a position on a specific piece of legislation. Many public health organizations encourage advocacy but may not permit lobbying.
- **Use the resources you have in public health.** If you're not sure where to begin, check out resources from public health organizations like the American Public Health Association and the National Association of County & City Health Officials.

**DO NOT undermine community-driven efforts.** Advocacy involves collaboration among those who are directly impacted by policy, which means it's important to ensure that you do not prioritize your own goals over those of the whole community.