



# ADVOCACY FOR SMALL-BUDGET, VOLUNTEER-LED CHORUSES

**P**ublic policy affects the work that you do every day, whether or not you receive government funding. Lawmakers' actions influence your patrons' charitable giving, the rights of your employees, intellectual property rights, the economic health of your community, and more. Your efforts to monitor, support, oppose, and even shape legislation can do much to ensure your chorus's success. If they are going to support you, policy makers need to understand the impact your programming is having in your community.

## IS IT LEGAL FOR US TO ADVOCATE?

Yes! Provided that:

- The advocacy furthers your mission.
- The advocacy is not a substantial part of your overall activities.
- You do not attempt to influence an election.
- You do not use federal grant money for lobbying purposes.

For details, consult [OPERA America's Advocacy Guides](#).

## AS A SMALL VOLUNTEER CHORUS, WHAT INFLUENCE DO YOU HAVE?

Tout the size of the choral community locally and nationally, and the commitment of choral singers. Chorus America's 2019 [Chorus Impact Study](#) found that more than 54 million Americans regularly sing in choruses and research shows choral singers are more civically engaged than the general public.

As the Study demonstrates, not only do music and the arts help strengthen your local economy, they are also a vital part of the community social fabric, fostering connection and contributing to community wellness. Public officials struggling to maintain a healthy economy and meet social challenges are especially receptive to programs with proven results. Use this research to convince them of the power choruses possess.

There's power in numbers. Identify existing arts advocacy coalitions and join your colleagues in support of initiatives that will benefit both your chorus and your cultural community as a whole.

## WHAT ROLE IN ADVOCACY SHOULD YOUR BOARD PLAY?

It's essential that board members monitor legislative activity related to your mission and make their voices heard to ensure that public policy decisions benefit your chorus. Using their existing networks and cultivating new relationships, they must be ready to convey clear messages to public officials about the impact of your programming and seek opportunities to engage in joint strategies with colleagues in other arts and nonprofit organizations. Board members must understand that advocacy is a core business function. Accordingly, they should make advocacy experience a criterion for recruiting new board members.

## WHAT ROLE SHOULD YOUR SINGERS PLAY?

When singers tell friends and neighbors how much belonging to a chorus means to them, they can be your most effective community ambassadors. Equip them for that role by including information about advocacy needs and opportunities in regular communication vehicles. In addition, ask them to contact lawmakers in support of relevant initiatives. Ask them to participate in joint advocacy efforts such as state capitol rallies for the arts. Even better, arrange for them to sing at these events. ►

## HOW CAN YOU ENGAGE YOUR BROADER COMMUNITY IN ADVOCACY?

Recognize that each performance is an advocacy opportunity. Use stage announcements or concert programs to highlight what's at the top of your agenda. Invite policy makers to concerts; ask them to take a bow or speak for a few minutes. Throughout the year, highlight advocacy opportunities in the same way you promote concerts or ask for donations, via email blasts, direct mail, etc. If you produce YouTube videos, think of ways to include supporters who can share your message.

## HOW TO FIT ADVOCACY INTO BUSY LIVES: FIVE EASY ADVOCACY STEPS

- 1** Regularly consult arts advocacy resources that keep tabs on important issues, such as Chorus America's [High Notes](#) blog, [OPERA America](#), the [League of American Orchestras](#), [Americans for the Arts](#), and the [National Association for Music Education](#) (on the federal level), and state and local arts and nonprofit agencies (on the more local level).
- 2** Include advocacy and policy updates as regular board meeting agenda items.
- 3** When you ask board members to take on advocacy initiatives, make your requests clear and specific, and make sure they're comfortable with the tasks.
- 4** If your singers complete a yearly evaluation, ask them whether and how their participation in chorus has benefitted their physical and emotional well-being. Use the data to show decision-makers that the impact of your work is measurable and meaningful for your community.
- 5** Remember: You can advocate for your chorus without calling your senator; share your positive experiences with friends and neighbors.

**By Don Lee**

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**Sources:** BoardSource: *Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards*; Chorus America: *Advocacy 101* and *Chorus Impact Study*; OPERA America: *Advocacy Guides*. Special thanks to Mary Ann Aufderheide, executive director (retired), VocalEssence, and Erin Guinup, executive and artistic director, Tacoma Refugee Choir.

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