Promising Practices

Building Relationships with Elected Officials Through Program Visits

The NCTN Promising Practice Series presents detailed descriptions of strategies from the field that are designed to promote the successful transition of adult basic education students to postsecondary education.

Contributed by
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Introduction
Reaching out and building relationships with elected officials is an important way to advocate for your students, program, and the field of adult education. As you will see from this practice, inviting an elected official to your program is just one way to build these important relationships.

Program Context
Mission
Established in 1981, the mission of Dorcas Place is to assist low-income adults to realize their full potential with programs in literacy, employment, advocacy and community involvement. In carrying out this mission, the agency embraces these values: advocacy, collaboration, community, family, empowerment, compassion, diversity, hospitality, life-long learning, respect and responsibility.

Services
Dorcas Place provides a comprehensive range of education programs and related services designed to fully support students in meeting their goals with respect to their adult roles of family member, worker, and citizen:

- Instruction in reading, writing, math, English, and computer literacy, in a classroom setting, up to 30 hours a week. Programs are available in different formats.
- One-on-one and small group instruction by staff and trained tutors in the Learning Resource Center.
- Workforce literacy program, including on-the-job internships and support services.
- Support services to help students identify their strengths and address obstacles that may interfere with attaining their education and work goals, with referrals to outside agencies when necessary.
- Family literacy program that brings parents and children together in a creative learning environment.
- Bridge to College program to help students make a successful transition to college after earning their GED.

Rationale and Background of the Practice
We invite elected officials to visit our program to learn about our agency and issues in adult education as a way to promote our program and our literacy agenda. While this practice focuses on building relationships with elected officials, it is also possible to extend this practice to other community leaders, including key policymakers, corporate executives, and heads of foundations. Bringing elected officials to your program gives you the opportunity to show off your program, demonstrate both the need for and impact of the program, and help community leaders personalize the role of your program by connecting with students. It’s also an important opportunity to begin developing relationships with decision makers who can be literacy advocates and allies. When elected officials visit your program, you gain an opportunity to advocate for additional services and discuss regulations or policies that would improve your program services. It is a chance to develop and deepen relationships with officials who can provide both support and the political will to advance your literacy agenda.

Initially, program visits were part of our civics education program, but we’ve learned that this strategy can be used to focus on any program or issue. It works especially well with college transition programs because a skilled workforce is so important right now and that’s a “hook” for both employers and elected officials.

Description of the Practice
The visit is a single event, but it is not just a one-shot deal. What we’re aiming for are strategic, lasting relationships with a number of political leaders. Building these kinds of relationships is a long-term commitment. It can be done on a small scale in one class, or on a larger scale that involves the entire adult education center. This does take a fair amount of preparation and some help on the part of your staff. I would say that it takes two people to organize a well-planned visit.
Before even organizing a visit, it’s important to establish some relationships and prepare the data and information you want to share with those who come to your program or agency.

Preparing for the Visit

Identify Whom to Invite - The first step is to identify the key elected officials and policymakers who could be literacy allies. I have always maintained a relationship with elected officials (on the local, state and national levels) and their staff. It is easy to overlook the importance of building relationships with the staff. But I would urge you to take relationships with staff very seriously—staff members are critical to carrying the message to the elected representative. An additional benefit of developing these relationships is that as staff and officials get to know you, your program may start getting students, volunteers, and even interns who have been referred by the staff or office. When working with members of Congress at the national level, it’s also important to maintain relationships with both district and D.C. staff.

Contact the Officials - Begin by inviting an elected official’s staff member to your program or agency. I generally write a letter or call them up. I’d say something like “I’d love for you to come to Dorcas Place.” It’s important to let them know that you would really be honored to have an elected member come visit.

It’s important to be flexible about scheduling the visit. I work completely around the elected official’s schedule. It doesn’t work for me to set a date and then see if the person is available. Keep in mind, they might not accept your first invitation. It may not be their top priority, so it’s very important to be persistent. One thing we’ve learned is that it’s hard to get members of Congress to attend events in the middle of the week, but they are usually in their local districts on Mondays and Fridays.

Gather Data and Prepare Information Packets - Gathering data and putting it together takes time but it really works. Policymakers and elected officials don’t expect to receive research and data on program outcomes, so it’s impressive when you provide it and it shows that you take your work very seriously. Numbers speak volumes to a lot of people, especially policymakers.

Since a lot of programs don’t have the time or money to pay someone to gather and analyze data, I would strongly suggest using interns for this. We had an intern this spring from Brown University who conducted a customer satisfaction survey and a follow-up survey on enrolled college students. One way to find interns is to meet with professors in the education and policy departments of a local college or university to see if you can be an internship site.

Additional Ways to Locate Information

2000 Census Data
The main website at www.census.gov is an interesting place to start, particularly to locate facts at the state level. More detailed census data can be compiled through the American FactFinder link at factfinder.census.gov.

Bureau of Labor Statistics
The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides monthly reports on the labor force, employment, and unemployment using the Current Population Survey. This can be reached at www.bls.gov/cps.

Public Library
The reference librarian at your local library can assist you in locating a wide variety of data about your city or town.

We prepare a packet for each visitor to take away with them that includes:

- Organizational materials (our annual report, brochure, information about volunteer opportunities, newsletter, financial overview, etc.)
- A demographic profile of the communities we serve (risk factors, poverty level, numbers with high school diplomas)
- A socioeconomic overview of Dorcas Place students (race and ethnicity, age range, reading level, level of unemployment, percent on public assistance, income level, number of women, local geographic areas that students come from, etc.). We make a point to show data at the neighborhood level so that an elected official can easily see a profile of his or her district. We want to be able to tell them how many people lack high school diplomas, how many are linguistically isolated, etc. We also want to be able to tell them how many program participants come from neighborhoods in their district.
- Student success data for each program we run (how many students were served, how many showed gains in different academic skills, how many received GEDs, how many enrolled in college programs, how many continued their education, etc.). For a sample of the data we share, see www.dorcasplace.org/students/demographic.html.
- A one-page story, written by a student, telling about their decision to come to Dorcas Place: What they are gaining from being here, what they’ve learned and how this learning is changing them, and their hopes for themselves. To read our students’ stories, including those of students from our Bridge to College Program, see www.dorcasplace.org/students/successstories.html.

Involves Students - Students have a key role during the visit. It is very important for visitors to hear from students. We make sure that students are well-prepared for these visits and it is very important to be prepared so that you can take
For each elected official who visits, a class is assigned to that person. They do research on that person's biography and prepare questions to ask. Based on the official's work and background, students also choose specific stories to tell that person about their experiences. Understanding the elected official's role is important because you want to make sure the students prepare questions that can be answered by that official. The mayor might not be able to answer specific questions about garbage pickup, for example.

We always have one student give a three-minute speech at the event that includes things like why she or he came to Dorcas Place, what she or he hopes to achieve, and what her or his hopes for the future are. Our college transition coordinator identifies a student who would be a good speaker. That student is asked to participate and to write a speech. We provide a lot of support in the process. The student practices the speech in front of the class. I also hear the speech. This is an important part of our educational program because it gives students the opportunity to be public speakers. Our experience has been that students come out of it so empowered because they've made a great presentation.

The choice of the student speaker is often very deliberate on our part. For example, in 2003, the governor came to visit our program. We spoke a lot about the low literacy levels among those with high school diplomas. A student gave a speech during that visit. She had a high school diploma but was attending our programs because she had been passed along by a system that didn't serve her well. She needed to improve her literacy skills, so came to Dorcas Place to do that. She spoke very eloquently about her experience and her story was very moving. It had such a great impact on the governor that he still makes references to that student's experience in public speeches today. That one speech went a very long way. (Meet Carleen Ferland, the student whose story so impressed the governor in this story from the Providence Journal.)

**Host the Visit** - The whole visit should take about an hour. Always have photographers there to document it. When elected officials arrive, students greet them. I then take the officials on a tour of the facility. As we walk, I cite the important research on our students' needs and our program model. This information lends credibility to our work. I let them know about the research that underpins the program models we have developed. For example, in our college prep program, we use a cohort model based on research by Tinto and a separate study done by Brookfield that says adults feel like imposters when they arrive at the college campus. This kind of information is very important and, like the other data, impressive to many policymakers.

After the tour, we have an assembly that includes students and staff from the entire program. Students from the class that has prepared questions for the visitor also act as greeters at the assembly. I begin the program by introducing the guest. It's important to do your homework on your guests' backgrounds—know what issues they champion, know where they stand and the work they've done. When I introduced our councilwoman I was able to say that she had been a tutor in our agency. If you know something about the person's work supporting adults, mention it and thank him or her. It can be hard to remember that elected officials also need to be recognized for the work they are doing. Thanking them and encouraging them to continue what they're already doing makes them more inclined to do the right thing in the future.

We then ask the visitor to explain his or her job. If the visitor is an elected official, we ask him or her to talk about how important it is for students to be involved in the democratic process, and to let students know that elected officials are accessible to students. Politicians will also talk about where they stand on issues. They are not shy about this and this is an important part of the visit.

Students then have a chance to ask their prepared questions, and one student also gives the speech that has been prepared for the visit. Finally, we thank the official for coming and making this a priority in his or her busy schedule.

**Maintaining Relationships after the Visit** - Once you have had an official come visit your program, you want to maintain a relationship with that person. The first step is sending a note thanking them for visiting your agency. There are also several ways to develop your relationship further with elected officials:

- **Send Them Your Newsletter** - Once you've initiated relationships with community leaders or elected officials, keep them up on what you're doing. Put them on your mailing list and send them your newsletter and annual report. *All* elected officials should be on your mailing list, including members of the school committee or school board.

- **Invite a Staffer to Serve on Your Advisory Board**
  Some adult education programs have advisory boards. One way of deepening relationships is by asking an official's staff person to serve on the advisory board.

- **Visit the State Legislature** - Elected officials want to hear from their constituents and visiting them is a great way to build relationships. I go to the statehouse once a year to meet with the D.C. staff of our congressional delegation. I am not averse to calling elected officials and I always say that they should call me, too. I offer to give presentations, provide data for them, and bring students to testify or speak to them.

- **Support Those Who Support You** - I also personally support elected officials. It's important to give back to the elected official if you are happy with their service—support their re-election, go to their fundraiser. It should be clear that this is done on your own personal time and with your own resources, not those of your agency or program.

**Challenges**

I would say there are two main challenges to having a successful visit by an elected official. The first is being flexible about dates. You simply have to work around elected officials and that's just the way it is. This can be a challenge, because you have to accommodate others' schedules, but it doesn't seem to work any other way. You also have to be
persistent. Since people may not accept your invitation immediately you have to follow up consistently and continue to extend invitations to them. It can be frustrating, so you have to hang in there with it.

**Cost and Funding**

Staff time is the main cost. Larger events mean more staff time and sponsors to cover any costs for refreshments or printed programs.

**Evidence of Impact and Effectiveness**

Building relationships with elected officials has resulted in several very important program impacts. One example would be that I have had congressional people call me up to ask me to read certain provisions in a bill and comment on it. This isn't something that happened right away, it takes some relationship building before you can get there, but this is a critical role for literacy programs to have. And, as you can see from the example I gave earlier, when the governor starts referring to the stories of your actual students, it enhances our ability to increase state funding not just for Dorcas Place, but for the field as a whole. By inviting the Governor to Dorcas Place we were able to encourage his advocacy efforts to increase support for literacy programs throughout the state. I've also received two congressional earmarks to expand our literacy services. I think these are direct results of having established relationships with policymakers.

In addition to elected officials, the practice of relationship building is also very applicable to the business community. I have been able to help key employers rethink their job entry requirements. Some major corporations insist on using GED or high school diploma as an entry requirement. But students who have participated in workplace training may not have either, even though they may have the skills needed to enter the workforce. I have convinced employers to focus on competencies and proficiencies rather than credentials. Without relationships of mutual respect I don't think we would have been able to change the discourse on this.

**Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research**

The overall mission of a visit is to promote your program and advocate for the services your program provides by building relationships. You are informing community leaders and policymakers about an important aspect of their community. You must be able to talk about the economic benefits of postsecondary education and encourage them to advocate and support college transition programs.

This write-up has focused very specifically on building relationships through visits to the program. Our staff also participates in many other ways in the wider community to promote our agenda and get our program known. There are ways to encourage staff to do this even if you're a small program. So, if you're a college transition program you might consider having staff attend meetings of your state's associations of financial aid or admissions officers. We've had staff members join a welfare implementation task force, and it turns out that one of the topics of importance to them was how to enable welfare recipients' entrance to college. Our staff can bring the perspective and needs of adult education students to these groups that may not already be represented. This is critically important.

**Reference**

To read more about Tinto's work visit: soeweb.syr.edu/academics/grad/higher_education/vtinto.cfm