

OVERVIEW OF AGENCY ROLES IN SHAPING POLICY



As persons with lived experience, it's crucial to understand the different systems and individuals who have a say in public policy. These stakeholders influence decisions on issues like bail reform, voting rights, and even services such as food assistance. Let's explore four key stakeholder groups, the roles they play, and how we can engage with them to push for positive changes in our communities.

Government Agencies

Who They Are — Government agencies include departments (Department of Justice), offices (Office of Child Support Services), bureaus (Bureau of Motor Vehicles), and more. Each of these agencies are created to implement policy, procedures, and programmatic offerings that help systems function in the public or private sector.

Their Role in Policy Creation — While they don't make laws, government agencies play a significant role in enforcing and implementing them. They also have the power to create regulations and guidelines based on existing laws or interpret laws and policies that give clarity on how they should work in community. Agencies often provide feedback to lawmakers during the legislative process and also frequently engage with the public depending on the scope of their work.

Engagement Considerations — Governmental agencies are primarily responsible for using public fiscal resources (dollars from legislation, taxes, budgets from county executives, etc.) to effectively provide key services as outlined in their statutory authority.

Statutory Authority: The power a government agency has to implement, interpret, and enforce policy created by legislation. *Example: The Occupational Health and Safety Administration is given statutory authority by the Occupational Health and Safety Act in 1970.*

Because these government agencies typically cannot *change* a law, the role of the government agency in creating economic opportunity rests in their ability to guide how the public uses their expertise and to listen to the needs of the public as they fund programs and procedures. The policy and initiatives they create and implement (within the scope of their *statutory authority*) are a great area of opportunity for influence.

Tactics / Examples

- Share research and data that highlight how certain policies disproportionately impact persons with lived experience. This data could influence future policy initiatives.
- Advocate for changes in the language of rules that could expand services, like food assistance or employment training dollars, for people leaving prison.
- Push for new initiatives or programs that increase services specifically for persons and families impacted by the criminal legal system.
- Raise awareness of how other agencies have addressed a similar issue, whether in your local community or a community nearby.

Example: In recent years, advocates have worked with government agencies to improve changing child support payment amounts during incarceration. These changes can only be implemented if a state's child support agency takes action to create this flexibility.

Questions for Consideration — What are the greatest needs in your community to create economic opportunity? Where are there significant roadblocks? Are these opportunities and barriers due to how a law is being implemented by an agency or due to the law itself?

Elected and Appointed Officials

Who They Are — Government agencies require various levels of leadership. These roles are often filled with individuals elected by the public or appointed by officials already elected. Elected officials include roles such as members of Congress, state legislators, governors, mayors, and city council members. They represent the public and (depending on the branch of government in which they work) make various decisions on laws, programs, funding, and more. While many of those most visible to the public are elected to office, others are appointed by elected officials or agencies instead based on their expertise and the need of the government agency (e.g., State Medicaid Directors, Department of Corrections Directors, Child Support Administrators, etc). In some instances, a role could be both appointed *and* elected (e.g., if a judge retires early or leaves the bench for another reason, often they are replaced through an appointed new judge).

Their Role in Policy Creation — Elected and appointed officials have the power to propose, vote on, and pass laws. Both elected and appointed officials are the target of many different special interest groups' attention, and the nature of their role and decision making can be deeply political. Their influence is crucial in shaping policies, including those that impact the criminal justice system. As elections approach, however, appointed officials may leave their post, and the life cycle of an elected official is not guaranteed. With policy creation also comes the creation of the funding to make it happen. Elected and appointed officials are key in securing funding for new initiatives and policies they help create—often with taxpayer dollars. Our voice as members of the public are critical during these planning and policy creation cycles as decisions are made.

Enhancing Our Voice with Values: A tried and true method of positioning our needs and rights with the interests of policymakers is to align our goals with the shared values of decision-makers. Building advocacy around policy change requires finding common ground with those in power. To learn more about using a Value, Problem, Solution, Action method in your advocacy

communications, check out [Communications and Values-Based Messaging](#) also found in this toolkit.

Tactics / Examples

- Meet with elected or appointed officials to explain how certain policies affect previously incarcerated individuals and communities impacted by the justice system. If an elected or appointed official will not take a meeting consider meeting with their second in command or another person who works closely with your target.
- Attend an interested party or stakeholder meeting to learn more about the current efforts on the issue and to engage with other advocates (potentially both those in favor and those opposed to your stance).
- Encourage them to support reforms like bail reform or the restoration of voting rights for people with felony convictions. When offering this encouragement, think about what would motivate this particular policy maker to care and what funding might be needed to create the solution you propose.
- Attend a public event or fundraiser for the elected or appointed official, introduce yourself and give them a 15-second pitch with a follow-up meeting request.
- Prepare public commentary for city council meetings, and partner with others to ensure the scope of your issue is fully covered. Local governments provide public hearings regarding funding priorities and positions where community members can comment.
- Organize letter-writing campaigns or public demonstrations to show community support of new programs, ending bad policies, or driving additional funding for economic opportunity. If they represent your district or area, your voice as a constituent can be used to open doors to policy conversations as well.

Example: In the fight for bail reform, advocates have engaged local elected officials to sponsor and vote for legislation that eliminates cash bail for low-level offenses. This change can help ensure that people aren't jailed simply because they can't afford to pay bail. How advocates engage, however, depends on the power and position of the policymaker. It also depends on the organization or individual's relationship to the issue.

Questions for Consideration — What steps could you take to *build a relationship* with elected officials who might support criminal justice reform? How would you explain the importance of reform in your community? If you are asking for additional funding, how will the government agency pay for it? How might an upcoming election or an appointee who is just starting in their role influence your messaging and timing?

Interested Party — A broad term that refers to anyone with an interest in a particular decision, process, or outcome. Interested parties may not be directly affected but are still curious or concerned about the issue. They may observe or provide input but aren't necessarily actively involved or influential. Their interest may or may not lead them to deeper involvement. *Example: City Hall is hosting an interested parties meeting to discuss their application for housing-related funds.*

Stakeholder — A more specific term, referring to individuals or groups who have a vested interest and may be directly affected by a project, decision, or organization's actions. Stakeholders often have some level of influence or active involvement, and their needs or concerns are usually a priority in decision-making. *Example: The Department of Health is gathering surveys from stakeholders for their priorities.*

Constituent — A person who lives in a specific area and is represented by an elected official. Their interests are linked to the policy decisions made by those officials, even if they're not directly involved in the decision-making process. *Example: Commissioner Smith is hosting a listening session with constituents to discuss her reelection campaign priorities.*

Workgroups, Committees, Commissions, Boards, and Caucuses

Who They Are — Workgroups, committees, etc. are formal or informal groups of policymakers, advocates, and community leaders who come together to focus on specific issues. These groups are often formed based around a topic (e.g., Equity in Sentencing Workgroup), policy platform (e.g., Prison Oversight Caucus), or statutory function (e.g., Senate Rules Committee). They are found within legislative bodies, administrative agencies, or as part of local or statewide advocacy efforts. They can be both permanent or temporary and can represent both interest areas or geographic areas. Area commissions, for example, are typically made up of residents and business owners who work together to advocate for their local needs.

Their Role in Policy Creation — These groups analyze specific issues, develop recommendations, and help create solutions to identified policy needs. Committees in legislatures often review bills before they go to the full body for a vote. Caucuses, such as those focusing on criminal legal reform, provide a space for stakeholders with shared goals to advocate for change. Workgroups may consist of experts and stakeholders who provide detailed feedback to inform new policies or their implementation. Regardless of who is in these groups, their role is to generate thought partnerships that lead to change. These changes drive both policy and funding that can either help or hinder the community.

Policy Implementation — It is often said by advocates that policy implementation does not match intention. While a piece of legislation or agency policy may be meant to create access to a new resource, if the agency or organization implementing it grants funding to a provider or creates a new program that can't be used because of when or where it serves the public, the implementation (or putting it into action) does not create the access intended. This is one of many reasons why our experiences with access (and exclusion) are so important.

Engagement Considerations

- Many of these policy groups hold public forums you can attend. These can include a hearing, a town hall, a listening session, a panel, an interested party meeting, and more. Attend or speak at one that focuses on an identified policy change you are championing. Don't forget to build relationships by introducing yourself to others!

- Build relationships with members of caucuses focused on issues like voting rights for formerly incarcerated individuals. Work with them to co-sponsor or support bills that align with your goals.
- Join or contribute to workgroups that focus on your targeted reform needs. Use your experience to inform policy discussions and highlight the challenges faced by previously incarcerated individuals. This can aid in proper implementation.
- Submit written recommendations or testimonies to groups considering reforms to ensure your voice is part of the decision-making process. Consider the type of public or private event you are providing recommendations to and the weight the group hosting them carries in policy decision making.

Example: In states pushing for bail reform, special legislative committees have been formed to examine alternatives to cash bail. Advocates working with these committees have been able to propose changes, such as pretrial diversion programs that directly address the needs of individuals impacted by cash bail systems.

Questions for Consideration — How can you or your organization more actively participate in workgroups or committees to influence criminal legal policy? Should your involvement be in person at a meeting or hearing or could you save resources by weighing in via phone or written comment? What expertise or lived experience could you or your organization offer to help these groups make informed decisions to ensure policies are implemented in a way that creates equity? How can you use these groups to research what other viewpoints exist?

Agency Staff

Who They Are — Agency staff are employees who work within government organizations like the Department of Corrections and local social services, as well as various office staff for lawmakers. They may include caseworkers, program managers, policy analysts, chiefs of staff, legislative directors, deputy directors, and many others who are responsible for creating, changing, and implementing laws and managing public services.

Their Role in Policy Creation — While agency staff do not make laws, they play a key role in interpreting and enforcing policies. Because a great deal of their role is assisting in the functions of the agencies who employ them, they are often well informed of policy developments, decision making, and other considerations essential for advocates. They provide insights into how policies are working on the ground and often give feedback to lawmakers on how to improve them. While elected and appointed officials may designate certain staff to work with stakeholders and constituents, there are many other important staff roles with whom advocates should consider establishing strategic relationships. Their experience with the daily operations of policymaking of all kinds makes them valuable in shaping how they are put into action. **Most importantly, the majority of agency staff do not depend on elections or appointments to keep their role.** As such, the time to develop working relationships is longer and can mature into powerful partnerships.

Engagement Considerations

- Build relationships with agency staff to understand how current policies are being applied and identify gaps that need reform. Determine the most appropriate way to communicate these to staff.
- Share data and stories from your community to highlight the challenges and successes of programs born out of policy they help implement and manage.
- Advocate for agency-level changes, such as streamlining processes for accessing services like food assistance or voter registration for persons with lived experience. These advocacy efforts can then be communicated upward and outward to elected and appointed supervisors or members of committees that employees staff and support.
- Participate in public hearings or comment periods where agency staff gather community feedback.

Example: In the realm of healthcare, agency staff at state-level departments of Medicaid may assist in gathering the experience and priorities of persons with lived experience. Engaging with staff members who handle this type of outreach can help ensure that they provide accurate information to their elected or appointed bosses while providing advocates and organizations the opportunity to monitor progress, opposition, and approval timelines.

Questions for Consideration — How can agency staff help in making policies work better for you, your family, your community, and your organization? What steps can you or your coalition take to ensure agencies are effectively serving formerly incarcerated individuals? What type of agency staff role is the best to start with once you have found the target agency or elected/appointed official for your advocacy as a stakeholder?

By better understanding the key roles highlighted in this document as well as many others, we can be more strategic as stakeholders and constituents, push for policy changes that will make a difference in the lives of persons with lived experience, and ensure *all of us* have full participation in society.

Questions for Reflection and Strategy

Many advocacy groups specifically target elected officials and the creation of laws. How might you and/or your organization or coalition broaden your focus beyond City Hall or the statehouse to agencies and their staff?

Within your specific advocacy space (e.g., voting, housing, sentencing, LGBTQIA+, etc.), can you identify examples of each of the categories covered in this document? How can you be more strategic as you engage with each of them? What are *their* priorities?

How can understanding the specific statutory authority of a government agency help you identify opportunities for advocacy within that agency's scope? Reflect on a service area relevant to your community, such as food assistance or employment programs, and consider how the agency's authority in that area might limit or enable new initiatives or policy change.