



# Advocacy Evaluation Update

ADVANCES IN THEORY, METHODS, AND PRACTICE

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## From Assessment to Action: Advocacy Capacity Assessment

*Susan Hoechstetter from Alliance for Justice examines advocacy capacity assessment and what has been learned about its use so far.*

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**The Marin County Equal Voice Coalition** wanted to become more effective at public policy advocacy on poverty-related issues in California.<sup>1</sup> To focus their discussions on how to strengthen the Coalition’s work, members turned to the *Advocacy Capacity Assessment Tool* from the Alliance for Justice (AFJ), one of several tools available for assessing nonprofits’ advocacy capacity, or the knowledge, skills, and systems they need to implement and sustain effective advocacy work. The tool asked a series of questions that provoked self-examination and led the Coalition to conclude that it needed to strengthen its nonpartisan election-related advocacy and its expertise on public policy issues.

The Coalition took two major steps as a result of its assessment. First, it developed the civic engagement campaign *Take Power over Poverty: Engage, Participate, Vote*. In Marin County, where most nonprofits are service providers with a strong client base, the campaign aimed to strengthen voter registration and education when clients accessed essential services within the county. Additionally, the Coalition used its coordinating group, the Grassroots Leadership Network of Marin (GLN), as a resource for policy research and as a hub for disseminating issue-specific data. GLN revamped its website to serve as a repository for policy research and as a locus for electronic advocacy. GLN also added more researchers to its team and

<sup>1</sup> Located north of San Francisco, the Coalition consists of advocacy and community organizing groups dedicated to ensuring that the needs of low-income people are heard on issues such as economic development, green jobs, housing, health care, immigration, transportation, and education.

planned partnerships with other policy-focused organizations at the regional, state, and national levels.

“The tool grounded us,” said Carolyn Placente, then the Coalition’s director and public policy advocate for GLN. “It gave us a common language and a framework for articulating how best to leverage our collective resources and how to maximize our opportunities for effective advocacy within the county. It provided us with a blueprint for what was needed for a strong advocacy campaign, including good research and analysis of how public policies are affecting families in Marin. And it helped us to realize how much more impact we could have if we could educate all of the candidates for county offices about our issues, while at the same time mobilizing our constituencies to harness their power by turning out at the polls on Election Day.”

### What is Advocacy Capacity Assessment?

Nonprofit organizations engaged in advocacy can have the same kind of positive or transformative experience as the Marin County coalition if they regularly assess their advocacy capacity, identifying their advocacy-related strengths and weaknesses. Taking the time to assess capacity is essential because the presence or absence of robust advocacy capacity signals whether nonprofits have a good chance of being effective.

Several tools have been developed to assist advocacy organizations with the capacity assessment process (see box for two examples). These tools help organizations to determine

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## Advocacy Capacity Assessment Tools

### Alliance for Justice: *Advocacy Capacity Assessment Tool*

[www.advocacyevaluation.org](http://www.advocacyevaluation.org)

A pragmatic series of measures of organizational capacities to be checked off by individual(s) in an organization or in a coalition. Measures can be categorized as organizational operations; partnerships/relationships; and skills, strategies and knowledge for influencing advocacy systems. The Tool is currently being revised to include analyses of results and other features.

### TCC Group: *Advocacy Core Capacity Assessment Tool*

[www.tccgrp.com](http://www.tccgrp.com)

A comprehensive tool administered independently to multiple people in an organization to assess advocacy capacities through survey questions about the organization’s actions. Questions are categorized by leadership, adaptive, management and technical capacities. The tool aggregates independent respondents to reduce biases that arise through group dynamics.

how to strengthen advocacy work by asking questions about staff skills and experience; the existence of relationships with key stakeholders such as public policymakers and non-profit allies; the ability to execute various tactics such as community engagement and public education; and more. They vary from tools dedicated exclusively to advocacy capacity assessment, to those embedded in other more broadly framed resources on advocacy evaluation or organizational capacity.<sup>1</sup>

### What Have We Learned About Its Use?

While many assessment tools have been developed, little information has been compiled on whether advocacy organizations know about and use them, or how advocates feel about the capacity assessment process in general. To address these questions, the Alliance for Justice (AFJ) collected feedback from advocacy organizations on their experiences with currently available tools and their additional needs for advocacy capacity assessment. Data were gathered from more than 140 advocates through surveys and interviews.<sup>2</sup> Major lessons and themes follow.

**Advocates use capacity assessment to improve their work.** Almost all advocates who reported having assessed their organization's advocacy capacity said it was useful. Advocates explained that assessments helped them to determine how to strengthen their work by, for example: discussing advocacy work within their organization and gaining a common understanding of what is involved; demonstrating advocacy strengths and challenges to funders; improving the organization's decision-making and other key operations; and identifying which types of partners to seek. The assessment process highlighted their need to develop specific advocacy capacities, such as building relationships with legislators, developing organizational flexibility, understanding the legal rules, or doing nonpartisan election-related work, according to those surveyed.

Assessments also helped advocates to educate funders about what they need in order to effectively influence public policy and the importance of capacity building. As one advocate commented, "These resources help us show funders what is possible." The commenter explained that some funders have underestimated

1 For more information about various tools, go to Innovation Network's website: [www.innonet.org](http://www.innonet.org). Also, the Foundation Center is continuing to develop an electronic compendium, Tools and Resources for Assessing Social Impact: <http://trasi.foundationcenter.org/>.

2 Specific data sources included: (a) a 2010 survey of participants in AFJ's Non-profit Advocacy Network and advocates who attended a 2009 convening on advocacy evaluation, (b) in-depth interviews with 5 advocacy organizations in 2010 randomly selected from the 2010 survey sample, (c) 5 years of feedback on AFJ's Advocacy Capacity Assessment Tool and trainings related to those tools, and (d) a 2009 survey administered by M+R Strategic Services to users of AFJ's Advocacy Capacity Assessment Tool.

what might be needed to achieve an advocacy objective.

**Capacity assessment is useful regardless of advocacy experience or sophistication.** New advocates often do not even know what questions to ask about advocacy capacities before using capacity assessment tools. While those who are experienced in public policy advocacy often instinctively and informally assess their abilities to be successful, a planned, structured process can benefit even the most seasoned of advocates. One experienced advocate explained that the structure offered by assessment tools allow her and her colleagues to think collectively about how to improve their policy engagement.

**Capacity assessment must be resource-efficient if it is to be done regularly.** While the majority of advocates reported having assessed their organization's advocacy capacity, most

said that they do not do so regularly (i.e., on an annual basis). When asked what would improve their ability to do annual assessments, most said more time and money, along with the availability of capacity assessment tools that are time-

and cost-efficient (e.g., require no more than three hours to complete), and are available free and online.<sup>3</sup> In addition, advocates expressed a desire for clear checklists of the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to be effective, probably reflecting their interest in efficiency.

**Advocates generally prefer tools that they can complete on their own.** Most advocates want assessment tools that they can use on their own, without external support or expertise. For example, one executive director whose organization used a self-assessment tool for group discussion commented: "I don't think we would've said as much with an outside evaluator present...This was like family talking it through." The preference for self-evaluation was not unanimous, however. Using an outside facilitator was critical to another staff leader creating a positive transformation in her organization. Since she was new to advocacy and the organization, she needed help to learn how advocacy works and to identify her organization's strengths and challenges. She added that now, with more experience, a self-assessment tool without facilitation would work for her and the organization. For many groups, resources for outside evaluators are not available. Therefore, tools that can be used with or without an outside consultant, and that are understandable by those with a limited range of advocacy experience, would be helpful for gathering information about a wide range of nonprofit organizations.

**Capacity assessment is most useful when it leads to concrete suggestions for improvement.** Advocates want tools with clear direction on how findings of organizational strengths and weaknesses link to actions that can be taken to be more effective advocates. As one said, "Now that you know

3 However, some advocates still prefer using hard copy materials, particularly in group discussions.

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## Advocates on What They Have Learned From Advocacy Capacity Assessments

- “To talk about capacity in a clear and organized fashion is a change in thinking about what can be tackled.”
- “We learned that we are highly regarded on the Hill and by the state guys in both parties, and by funders, but that our communications were woefully inadequate and needed to be beefed up.”
- “We added and incorporated new messaging and we added an additional public education strategy supporting our advocacy work.”
- “If advocacy is a means to an end but not the primary mission of your organization, it often makes more sense [to] leverage the capacity of other organizations or seek outside legal assistance to accomplish the objectives you seek.”
- “Other organizations and individuals report that we have been effective in organizing environmental advocacy efforts in our county, both grassroots and organizing with other nonprofits. And they look to us to lead on this.”
- “An important insight is to tailor our message to the intended audience.”
- “Understanding advocacy processes, order, and understanding how to use different tools for different needs are important.”
- “It has absolutely transformed my organization.”

where you're strong or not strong, what's your next step?”

One approach for linking advocacy strengths and weaknesses to actions is to set goals for increased organizational capacity as part of the overall advocacy planning and evaluating process, and then to monitor progress of those goals along with legislative, regulatory, and other efforts to gain policy-related wins. Case examples were also cited as a way to help link assessments to action by allowing advocates to reflect on their own work, compare their results to those of similar organizations, and consider different strategies and actions.

### What are Implications for Funders, Advocates, and Intermediaries?

Advocates' feedback suggests specific ways that funders, advocates, and intermediaries (organizations who help advocates assess or build their capacity) can ensure that advocacy capacity assessment is used more frequently and effectively.

#### For Funders

- Include building grantees' advocacy capacity in funders' grantmaking goals.
- At the beginning of a grant period, recommend that grantees assess and plan for improving their advocacy capacity.
- Recommend that grantees regularly reassess their advocacy capacity to determine if and how it has grown or been reduced.
- Make funding, technical assistance, assessment tools and other capacity supports available to grantees for assessing and building advocacy capacity.

#### For Nonprofit Leaders

- Assess advocacy capacity regularly, at least annually.
- Discuss advocacy capacity with staff members and the board.
- Incorporate capacity assessment into planning for major advocacy projects.
- Include plans and funding requests for strengthening advocacy capacity in grant proposals.
- Consider partnering with others along with developing internal advocacy capacity.

#### For Evaluation and Capacity Building Intermediaries

- Share information about the value of advocacy capacity assessment and the availability of related resources with funders, grantees, and other nonprofits.
- Promote common understanding of advocacy capacities through user friendly self-assessments which are understandable by both those with a limited range of advocacy experience and more sophisticated advocates.
- Continue to develop or adapt low-cost and free self assessment tools that smaller nonprofits can afford.
- Help nonprofits turn information into action by providing case models and (anonymous) information about other organizations' capacity assessment results and use of those results.
- Develop guidance for how capacity assessment resources can be adapted for coalitions, community organizing, multicultural, and other uses. ♦

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