**Podcast Transcript Advocacy Letters 101 – August 2021**

**Narrator:**

This is a CNIB Foundation podcast.

**Kat Hamilton:**

Hello, everyone, and welcome to this episode of The Advocacy Podcast. Today, we're going to be talking about how to write a really compelling advocacy letter. I'm Kat Hamilton, senior manager from Ontario East & Government Relations, and I'm joining you today from Ottawa. I'm also joined by Sarah Besseau, who's our coordinator for advocacy and community outreach from Ontario West, who is also joining us from Ottawa. Hello, Sarah.

**Sarah Besseau:**

Hello.

**Kat Hamilton:**

Well, Sarah, I'm really excited to be talking with you on this subject today ... is I really strongly believe that writing a compelling advocacy letter can be a really powerful yet understated tool in raising an advocacy issue with a decision maker or third party. And in this podcast, we're going to be walking people through each part of the advocacy letter in order to teach people how to make it really strong and hopefully achieve your end advocacy goal. Sound good, Sarah? Shall I start us off?

**Sarah Besseau:**

Sounds great.

**Kat Hamilton:**

All right. Well, definitely the first part that we wanted to discuss before we dive in is, really, the purpose of an advocacy letter. So an advocacy letter is very understated sometimes as a tool, but at its core, it's really an opportunity to present the issue and invite the recipient to collaborate with you to find a solution. And it's always best when you're putting together your letter to assume that the recipient of your letter is interested in finding a solution but perhaps doesn't really know how to do so yet, and that will really help ensure that you're entering into the letter writing process with a respectful tone and also just a willingness to work together towards a solution.

**Kat Hamilton:**

And it's funny that we call this advocacy letters because I think, more and more, that we're using email now instead of writing a physical letter on pen and paper. And when I was preparing for this podcast, I was just reflecting that accessibility aside, that on some occasions when a recipient is perhaps more traditional or their organization is geared more towards letters ... or perhaps there's, in some rare circumstances, a legal reason that you'd want to send a hard copy. But yeah, I was thinking when I started doing advocacy about 10 years ago now, it was more of a weird hybrid phase of email and a hard copy letter, that you'd send both just in case, so you covered all your bases.

But although we've called this advocacy letter, I think it's important to know that nowadays, a lot of things can be effectively dealt with in writing over email. So if letters doesn't work for you for accessibility or for whoever you're sending it to, then that's absolutely fine. I think it's safe to say that in most situations now, email is also a great option.

So I feel like I've spoken a lot already, Sarah, and you haven't had a chance to tell us very much yet. So I guess with that, now we've gone over the basics and the purpose of a letter. I think going into the foundation of how an advocacy letter is started and built is really important, so I guess my question for you, Sarah, is, how would you even start an advocacy letter?

**Sarah Besseau:**

Great. So I guess at the very beginning of an advocacy letter, when you're just opening the letter before you get into, I guess, the body of the letter, you're greeting the person that you're writing the letter to, right? So you're wanting to say, dear whoever, dear James, or attention Counselor Blank, right? So their name and the title and another word to go alongside it. It's the first thing that the person that you're sending the letter to is going to read, so it really sets the tone and how the letter is going to follow.

So it lets the reader know that you've done your homework, right? So making sure you're putting the right title or, if you're writing to an elected official, making sure that you're putting the right title and the elected official's name is really important, or that you've put the right title there. If you're in a rush or you haven't done your research and you've just put Mr. or Mrs., and it is an elected official, instead of putting their title, it might show that you're in a rush or you didn't do your research. So slowing down, taking your time is really important as well as doing your homework.

If you are writing to an elected official, it's really good to keep in mind to use the formal greeting, and here's a good tip. Canada has a website that you can go to where it has a list of all kinds of officials and the formal greetings that you can use, so the way that you can address them in different ways. So that's a really good resource to use in writing these letters. So if the person you're writing to is not an elected official, it's generally good to find a senior representative with a title to address the letter to.

Now, before I jump back to you, Kat, I just want to touch on another point here that I have in salutations, which is pronouns. And I'm sure a lot of people know what pronouns are, but using them in this context can be kind of a tricky thing. So pronouns are words that we use in place of a person's proper name. Sometimes, people share them in introductions, or we see them a lot of time in email signatures. We share them to avoid assuming someone's pronouns based on factors like appearance, and it encourages other people to use them as well. And it's a really important part of being an ally, which is awesome.

Some common pronouns are she/her, he/him, they/them, and some people prefer not to use them at all. The reason I'm bringing this up is because when you're addressing a letter to someone whose pronouns you're unsure of, it's best to avoid gender-specific pronouns or use gender-neutral language to avoid misgendering someone. There's almost always gender-neutral language to use, and it builds a welcoming space in your letter.

So with that being said, this very small section of your letter, usually only a few words, might seem like a lot of info, but it's really important. So Kat, after the salutation, this is probably the thing that I find the most difficult. I never know how to start a letter, an email, an essay. How do you even just start an advocacy letter after you just addressed it?

**Kat Hamilton:**

Yeah, you're right, Sarah. It's, it is a difficult part of the letter. I think all of the parts of the letters really have their own complexities. And as you were talking, I was thinking about how even, as you said, in those few words in the salutation, it's such a difficult balance to have and know how to address someone respectfully and properly. So I really love that you highlighted that government of Canada resource because I've used that a few times for sure for my own letters.

But yeah, to go back to your question around the introduction, I think it's really tempting, especially if the issue at hand has really upset you or has emotionally affected you in some way and you want to get it off your chest, that you don't just launch into everything. So I think, really set the tone for the letter, and there are some really great kind of formula that you can take on that.

So first off, really simple, just start off stating your name, your connection to the issue, especially if you're writing on behalf of yourself or you're writing on behalf of someone else, and also the relevant pieces of information that connects you to the issue at hand, so for example, that you have a certain disability, if that's relevant to the issue, or you're a resident of a certain community, particularly if you're writing to a politician, because they're really interested in, obviously, the people that live within their constituency or riding or maybe that you're a patron, a long-time patron, maybe, of a particular business, or whatever the connection is, really setting the stage for who you are and indicating, perhaps, why you might be writing.

And then once you've done that, in the next paragraph, I think you'll want to provide a snapshot of the issue that you're writing about. So the explanation of that issue should be really clear and concise, and you'll have plenty of space to expand on the issue in the rest of the letter, so, I think, really stating the issue in as few words or sentences as you can, while communicating the core of the issue. So for example, my name is Kat Hamilton. I am a resident of Ottawa or a particular riding, and I've also been a longstanding customer of Shoppers Drug Mart and have been shopping here for many years, and that that's relevant, perhaps, if you're writing to Shoppers Drug Mart. And you want to identify what the location is of that particular business and that you've been a longstanding customer, which will then lead into what the issue is, so very simple, just a short paragraph.

But I wanted to circle back, maybe, to something that we've touched upon already, and that's a note around anger as you really set the tone for your letter in the introduction. So in advocacy, anger can be a really great motivator to get you going and sit down at your computer or sit down and write a letter and raise the issue, but it can also be really destructive if you come across as angry. And it could also give the impression that you're not really willing to come to the table to collaborate on a solution.

So I say this from my own experience. If you feel like, when you sit down to write the letter, that you're unable to get to that point emotionally, then I would suggest maybe writing out a first version of the letter that you do not intend to send but want to just get all your thoughts on paper. Or call up a friend, someone who's calm and that won't rile you up further, and just vent to them.

And then once you've got all of the anger out or enough of the anger out, then I would suggest sitting down to write the letter after that. And even myself, I'm an experienced letter writer, and I have also asked friends or family to read over a letter before I send it, because sometimes if you are feeling emotional about something or upset, what sounds reasonable to you can still come off as maybe unreasonable or passive aggressive in writing, even though you don't intend it to. So really, having someone else read it as a sounding board, if you feel at risk from that, is a really great strategy.

So those are just a few considerations, really, for making an introduction really clear, concise, and explaining the connection to the issue. But Sarah, I'm really interested because the next section is a lot more kind of open around how to structure the actual issue of the letter. So how do you go about that? Is there a certain formula or some tips that people can use when outlining the actual issue?

**Sarah Besseau:**

Yeah, so you're right. This is the part in the letter where you focus on the issue, is a lot more open. And I think you follow the same kind of ... You've touched on the note on anger. You follow that, I think, through not just the introduction, but the rest of the letter as well, right? And I know my policy is always you write the letter, wait 24 hours, come back to it, and adjust later.

**Kat Hamilton:**

Yeah, that's a good one.

**Sarah Besseau:**

Right? Yeah. But I think when you're looking at the issue, obviously, it's, I think, the meat of your advocacy letter sandwich, and it's a big part of this letter. And I think when you're looking at it, you touch on it. You touch on the issue in your introduction, but this is where you go into it in more detail.

And I think this is where it can get a little bit chaotic because it can be fueled by emotion here. But the goal of this section is to explain it in a way that's easy to understand. So some things that are important to remember in this section is that chances are, if you're writing an advocacy letter, you probably know a lot about the situation, but the person that's reading the letter probably doesn't know a lot about the situation, if anything. So what's important to remember is using straightforward language, choosing words that are easy to understand to target it to an audience that is probably hearing of the issue for the first time.

So I can give an example. So if you are ... Let's see. An example might be, I'm at a store. I'm legally blind. I was at your store. It was impossible for me to navigate because your floor markings are inaccessible. So that is obviously a difficult situation, but another way to navigate this might be, I'm blind, and I use a white cane to navigate. While I know that all customers in your store are supposed to follow the arrows on the floor, I am not able to see the arrows, nor can I feel them with my cane when I sweep it across the floor. As a result, I'm not able to shop independently in your store. So those two options, the longer one, the second one uses a lot more language and a lot more ... It uses easier-to-understand language that the reader of the letter might be able to understand the situation.

So when you're presenting the issue, it's important to also include dates and times and names of your issue of the issue. So if you've had multiple issues at a single event or a single business, you want to include those in your letter because you want to basically paint a picture of the entire situation and the entire issue. It's important to stick to kind of high-level information to avoid speculation or accusations.

So it's a lot of information, and I think it's important to sometimes take a step back from it and maybe approach it from a little bit later because I think it can be fueled from emotion, like all of these parts of this letter. But I also think it's important. I want to touch on, I think, persistence of these advocacy letters. When you're writing this, it's obviously something that's very important to you, and I know it can be very frustrating to wait for a response.

Sometimes, the recipient of your letter might not have the ability or the interest to assist in the issue that you're advocating on, and because of that, it's really important to be persistent. Most change is not going to happen with one letter, but I think every letter impacts. Every letter is impactful, and it's definitely more impactful than no letter at all. So persistence is really important. Sometimes, you have to convince people as well that your issue is going to benefit others for them to help you with your issue. So now that I'm done with that part, I think, what is the phrase? It's better to bring up problems if you also have solutions. Is that right, Kat?

**Kat Hamilton:**

Yeah, definitely. And just to, I guess, add to something that you were saying around keeping the facts really high level, I totally agree with that, and I think most of the time, that's what people need to do. But I think if people are sitting down to write their letters as well and it's a really long, complicated history that's happened over a number of years ... Say it's a very complex issue. I think there's a couple of strategies people can have as well, either write exactly as you said with the high-level stuff and then maybe even attach something as an appendix. I've seen that done particularly in customer service situations where someone ... They called the manager on this day, and the manager said this. And then they called someone else, and then they called head office. And it starts to get very complicated.

You don't want that person to open your email and scroll down and see it's really long and put them off immediately from reading it. So I think put it in an attachment or just even say in the letter that it's a really complicated situation, and I'd really appreciate discussing this over the phone or in person, whatever that looks like, to resolve that. But yeah, it seems so simple, doesn't it, writing a letter, but now we're digging into it, it really is a fine art in many ways.

But yeah, as you mentioned, the solution is probably one of the most important parts of the letter, because otherwise, if you're just writing someone to play what the issues are without even indicating any willingness to have a solution or putting on forward, then really, it's just a complaint. And while that might be really cathartic, it's not going to make any tangible, positive changes once the recipient has read it. They're just going to read your complaint and then be like, okay, that's a shame, and maybe, if they're good at customer service, send you back some letter with some empty platitudes in it.

But that being said, you don't have to have all of the answers or a fully formed solution. And in fact, one solution can just be to propose to the person, let's get together and discuss some solutions together. What would work for you? What would work for me? Because that still shows that you want to reach a resolution, but at that point, you might not know all of the options available or even how the issue can be solved. But it still demonstrates that willingness to have that collaboration.

And to go back to the advocacy toolkit that has been developed by CNIB around advocacy letters, there is a really great example in there that I just wanted to share because we have given some solution-focused sentences from that toolkit. So in the toolkit, there are three solutions to an issue around, I believe, a business's website being inaccessible. So the first solution is to request that a member of staff contact you by phone to assist you in making a purchase from the store's website. The second solution is to request that the company send out an email to all customers offering a discount on the next purchase for those who can't shop on their website because of accessibility barriers. I mean, sure, sounds nice, but isn't necessarily going to solve the issue in the longterm. And then solution three is to request that the company do a complete overhaul of their website to make it accessible to all customers.

So in those examples, while all of the above solutions are ... I would say some of them are more reasonable than others but are all relatively reasonable. Probably, the first solution with a staff member contacting would be most attractive to the company as it's specific, which is really important, realistic, and much more inexpensive than, say, giving discounts to everyone or overhauling the entire website. And the second or third solutions are also specific and realistic, but it would be more expensive and take more time.

So in these examples, you can really see how providing some multiple solutions might make it easier for the recipient to choose and resolve the issue. So if you wanted to give them various solutions as well, then that could be one option to show that you're willing to be flexible in that. And I actually think with solutions three, if it was me writing the letter, I probably wouldn't request a complete overhaul of a website to make it accessible, but maybe it's a case of suggesting some website accessibility services that you might know about or, if it's just some very specific tagging or coding in the backend of the website, maybe offering to write out or talk to one of the website technicians to see, if you provide them the detailed feedback, if they can just make those changes if it's relatively simple.

And I guess, the final thing I want to say on solutions is that there is really a lot to be said for humility when you're advocating effectively. And I think as strong advocates out there that sometimes, some people might be tempted to think that you need to demand absolutely everything as you want it, and that is coming from a place of strength. But I think realistically, coming in with an all-or-nothing approach, you really run the risk of leaving with nothing.

And advanced and nuanced advocacy really thinks from the perspective of the other person as well, so what their needs and wants might be what their restrictions might be, whether that's budget policy, et cetera, and then really thinking about proposing solutions where your needs and their needs meet in the middle. That is really the secret sauce for an excellent solution. So I think that's all I wanted to say at this point around the solution piece. So Sarah, we've really covered a lot so far in this, so we've run through the salutations, the introduction, the issue, the solution. And then once you've gone through all of that process, what is a really great way ... or what tips do you have for people to round off the letter and conclude it in an effective and impactful way?

**Sarah Besseau:**

Well, like you said, we've gone through the salutation, crafting a nice introduction, presenting the issue in an easy way to understand, offered solutions, but we're not done yet. The conclusion is a nice way to kind of wrap everything up and go over the importance of the issue once more. So to end, it's a really good chance to connect it to the broader community and also to detail any follow-up items and then sign off. So this is also a good time to outline any action items in your closing remarks, so that could be dates and times of upcoming meetings where the recipient of your letter might be able to bring up the issue that you've addressed, like a committee meeting, or maybe a timeframe of when you plan on following up.

I think this also shows how important the issue is to you, that you've taken the time to look into when these meetings are or that you've said, I'm going to follow up in two weeks from now. And it shows how important this is to you and also your community. And then in your sign-off, also include contact details that are relevant and up to date. So if they get in contact with you, they're able to. That's very important.

But I think that kind of ends the letter, but now that it's sent off, you're waiting. But what happens if your letter isn't answered or the issue isn't addressed? Or what happens if it is addressed but not in the way that you would've liked to have it addressed?

**Kat Hamilton:**

Right, and I think this speaks to what you were saying earlier around persistence being key. And I feel like we could do a whole podcast just on strategies for how to escalate an issue effectively, because I think in reality, we always say that advocacy is not linear. There are many different paths that it can take, and it's very rare that you put in a complaint. The person responds and says, yes, we'll fix it, and then it gets fixed, so a very important question that you raise here.

So everyone's approach is different, but I would say in general, my rule of thumb is to send the letter. Depending on the urgency or who you're writing to, it really depends. Leave it a couple of weeks. If you don't hear back, then maybe send one or two follow-ups with a week or two in between, and then at that point, if you don't hear back, then you are well within your rights to then look at who can you escalate that to. So that might be someone who oversees that person or department, or perhaps there's even a different complaints department, depending on what the organization is. And again, that process really might be sped up, depending on the urgency and the nature of the issue.

And my advice as well would be to absolutely exhaust that internal process of that organization before taking external action. And what I mean by that is people saying, I'm going to go to the media, or I'm going to write to my MP, if it's not government that you're dealing with originally. So really try and exhaust that. You really don't want to be accused of being unreasonable by escalating something too quickly, so it really is a fine art. It's also, I think, human nature, sometimes, really easy to take offense or read into something when you're not hearing back. But it's always important to keep in mind that for all you know, they might have received a lot of correspondence, or someone might be actively looking into it for you but just needing some more time and not necessarily sharing that information. So you really don't want to blow your chances by making an assumption or taking offense and then escalating something too quickly as well.

So yes, there is really a whole strategy around there if someone doesn't respond, or maybe it's a generic response that they do give you. And in that case, if they respond with some kind of generic response or brush-off or just restate their position and dig in without recognizing some kind of solution, then I think there's even a separate strategy that we could talk about to that, because that's not not hearing back. That is, you're hearing back but not necessarily reaching some kind of conclusion there.

So as I said, I could talk about that for a whole other podcast, and maybe we'll do that in the future if there's interest on that. But for now, I think we will leave it there, and I hope everyone has found this podcast helpful in learning how to build a strong advocacy letter. As we mentioned, if you'd like further resources, then you can also visit the advocacy section on CNIB today, and we will be posting shortly our advocacy letters 101 toolkit that walks you through this process we've discussed and also gives you some really helpful templates that you can use and edit for your needs so you're not starting off just from scratch. So with that, I think we'll sign off, but any final words of wisdom, Sarah, for people that are considering writing an advocacy letter?

**Sarah Besseau:**

I think, just persistence, I think, is really important. I think the notes on persistence and your emotion in the letters, I think, are really important in writing an advocacy letter. I think those are my two cents.

**Kat Hamilton:**

Sounds good. Yeah, I would definitely agree with that. And with that, then, we will sign off for today. I'm Kat Hamilton. I've been joined by Sarah Besseau, and we hope to hear from you all soon. Thanks, everyone.

**Narrator:**

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