

2016 PHONE LOBBY PILOT PROJECT: EVALUATION

OVERVIEW

From February to May of 2016, the Stillwater LWV hosted a pilot project designed to examine the feasibility of phone lobbying as a form of citizen lobbying. We saw this effort as complementary to the in-person lobbying carried out by Board Member Sandy Bahan at the state capitol.

The goal of the phone lobby team was to let our legislators know about selected legislation that we, as League members, supported or opposed. Our reasoning was that if five or more phone lobbyists called about a bill, the legislator would pay attention to it.

By mid-May, when the pilot project ended, there were 8 phone lobbyists, including the leader. We had lobbied on 16 bills and resolutions in the Oklahoma legislature and 5 bills and resolutions at the federal level. Fourteen of the bills, all at the state level, had the outcome we had lobbied for.

Recruiting Members

I recruited the first five members among the League members who had worked on the local Drug Policy Study that we had recently completed. They were all women whom I saw on a regular basis at League functions and at other venues. I also invited a former League member to join us. She had recently moved to a town a few hours from Stillwater. Later, I reported on the work of the phone lobbyists to our League and invited all members to volunteer. The out-of-town member eventually dropped out, but three more Stillwater League members joined the team. In May, the members included Judy Clay, Cassie Taylor Reed, Joanne Murer, Pat Jaynes, Jan Largent, Deanna Homer, Kay Murphy, and Sue Garzon.

HOW THE PHONE LOBBY WORKED

Each week I selected one bill or a series of associated bills. I read the bill's description, judged whether it fit within LWV program positions, and checked its progress in the legislature. For Oklahoma legislation, I read the text of the bills and checked on their progress at legiscan.com. For federal legislation, I checked www.congress.gov.

In preparation for the phone calls, I wrote out a description of the bill and two to five talking points, as well as the name and phone number of the appropriate legislator(s). (See Appendix below for sample bills.) I then e-mailed the information to team members, asking them to make phone calls over the next week.

I suggested that team members give their name and home town and tell the legislator (or more likely a staff member) which bill they supported or opposed and explain why. If possible, they might start the conversation by thanking the legislator for something positive that he/she had

done. I also advised team members not to mention that they were with the LWV, since the LWV frowns on this.

I asked lobbyists to e-mail the group after they'd made their calls and to pass along any information. This worked well at first, but over time team members were less likely to report. I had pointed out that lobbyists were not obliged to call about particular bills, and I'm sure that some members occasionally skipped a week.

Sources of Bills

To select bills, I used a variety of sources, including the following:

- The Oklahoma Policy Institute. Their advocacy was often in line with LWV positions. It was easy to use their web site (okpolicy.org), which provided information on the bills and suggested talking points.
- The list of priority legislation for LWVOK prepared by Board Member Sandy Bahan.
- Member suggestions, including two that originated in *The Tulsa World*.
- Friends and colleagues who worked on issues relating to the aged in Oklahoma and to drugs and incarceration in Oklahoma. Bills that addressed drug policy and sentencing were of particular interest to Stillwater league members since our league had just finished a local study on drug policy.
- The Friends Committee on National Legislation web site (fcn.org). FCNL is a Quaker lobbying group in Washington D.C., and I often found their positions to be in line with LWV positions. I used this source for federal legislation, which was a secondary interest for us.

THE RESULTS

Challenges and Concerns

Selection of bills was probably my greatest challenge. In 2016, the deadline to introduce a bill was January 21, and the legislative session began on February 1. Of the bills and resolutions to be considered, 1724 were carried over from 2015, and 1698 new bills were filed, so the number was daunting, and I did not attempt to review them. Instead, I relied on the sources listed above.

An additional challenge was that of identifying legislation that would be considered in committees in which the Stillwater legislators served. Since a bill can either die or be sent forward from a committee, if we have a legislator on a given committee, that is one of our best opportunities to have our voices heard and exert our influence. I would like to figure out a timely way to identify relevant bills.

Timing is another issue that is not easily resolved. When I set up the phone lobby, I asked that team members call their legislators within a week on a particular bill. However, we often had little advance notice when a bill was coming up for a vote, often only a day or two. If I had already directed members to call about a bill, I was reluctant to ask them to make additional last-minute phone calls. However, some members contacted legislators on their own. This was certainly in keeping with our goals.

The bills themselves could prove problematic. Unfortunately, some bills, including a few that probably warranted our opposition, were written with overly vague or confusing language. This made it difficult if not impossible to demonstrate that the actions described could be supported or opposed on the grounds of LWV program positions.

In other cases, I could not find LWV program positions at the local, state, or national level that dealt with the issues addressed in certain bills. Of course, members were free to make additional phone calls or send e-mails about these bills when they felt so moved.

Rewards

- Members of the phone lobby team all became more informed citizens through a close examination of important legislation, particularly at the state level. We also became more knowledgeable about the legislative process in Oklahoma.
- Often, we seemed to know more about the legislation than the staff members we talked to, so we ended up playing an educational role. (A friend of mine who was on the staff of a federal lobbying group [FCNL] said that over the years she noticed that some of the staff people she had lobbied went on to have responsible positions in the government, so she felt that the time she had spent expressing her positions and beliefs with them was not wasted.)
- We conversed with staff members and developed at least the beginnings of a working relationship.
- We took an active role in the legislative process, particularly at the state level, and we had the satisfaction of knowing that we had made our voices heard on a variety of important issues.

Member Feedback

A number of team members met in August to discuss how the pilot project had gone. Members expressed satisfaction with phone lobbying, and some said they intended to do it again next year. As part of our conversation, we discussed ways that we could strengthen our relationships with legislators. One outcome of the discussion was that we proposed having the Stillwater League invite our new senator to address the league on his legislative agenda and to answer questions. We also plan to take advantage of the legislative forum organized by the Stillwater League every year to introduce ourselves to our legislators.

STARTING PHONE LOBBY TEAMS IN OTHER OK LEAGUES

At the July State Board meeting it was pointed out that if phone lobbies are to be truly effective, we need to organize them in Leagues across Oklahoma. If League members from different areas join their voices to support or oppose legislation, we can increase our influence state-wide.

The following is a plan for organizing phone lobby teams in Oklahoma Leagues:

- A leader and a minimum of four other members volunteer to form a local phone lobby team.
- The local leader contacts the state leader (Susan Garzon in 2017).
- The local group meets and discusses legislative issues of importance to them. They figure out who their legislators are and what committees they are on.
- Between February and May, the state leader sends information on a bill (or bills) of interest to League members each week during the Oklahoma legislative session, February to May. The local leader determines which legislator(s) should be phoned and sends that information to team members. Alternatively, the local team may select its own bill, in which case a local team member needs to send out information on the bill. The local leader should also notify the state leader of the change.
- Local phone lobby members make their calls and pass on relevant information to other local members.
- At the end of May, the local leader meets with the team to elicit feedback on their lobbying activities. He/She also informs the state leader of which bills and resolutions their group supported or opposed and passes on feedback from the local team.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE 2016 BILLS WE LOBBIED ON

The language is that used in the e-mails I sent to phone lobbyists in the Stillwater League.

1. **HB 3196** (one of the LWVOK priority bills)

This bill establishes a pilot program to try out voting by mail. It's another possible way to expand voter access. Here's the wording from legiscan.com:

The Secretary of the State Election Board is authorized to create a pilot program to conduct a vote-by-mail special election for any county, school district, technology center, municipal or other special purpose district election conducted by a county election board.

Possible Talking Points

1. I support finding new ways to expand voter access.
2. Participation by voters is typically low in local and county elections. This might be a way to stimulate it.

The bill has passed the House and should go to the Senate next.

To support this bill, phone:

Senator Jim Halligan: 405-521-5572

2. **HB 2962** (Info from *Tulsa World*, Feb 28, 2016 and from legiscan.com)

This bill requires health insurers to cover the screening, diagnosis, and treatment of autism spectrum disorders in individuals less than 9 years of age. Some conditions apply for older individuals who are autistic.

Possible Talking Points

You may want to come up with your own talking points. The following points are based on public policy positions of the national LWV.

I support the bill because:

1. It will provide a basic level of quality care for children with autism.
2. It promotes the well-being and development of a group of children who are at risk.

To support this bill, phone:

Representative Cory Williams 405-557-7411

3. **H.R. 3713**, the Sentencing Reform Act, and **H.R. 759**, the Recidivism Risk Reduction Act. (This information comes from fcnl.org, the Quaker lobbying organization in D.C.)

To summarize: These bills reduce several lengthy mandatory minimum sentences, give judges more discretion in sentencing, and help prepare prisoners to re-enter their communities. Both bills have strong bipartisan support.

Here's more detail:

The Sentencing Reform Act of 2015 (H.R. 3713)

This bill permits a court to reduce the mandatory minimum prison term imposed on certain non-violent defendants convicted of a high-level first-time or low-level repeat

drug offense (including unlawful import, export, manufacture, or distribution of, or possession with intent to distribute a controlled substance). The legislation expands safety valve eligibility to permit a court to impose a sentence below the mandatory minimum for certain non-violent, cooperative drug defendants with a limited criminal history. It reduces the enhanced mandatory minimum prison term for certain defendants who commit a high-level repeat drug offense, use a firearm in a crime of violence or drug offense after a prior conviction for such offense, or unlawfully possess a firearm after three or more prior convictions. It permits retroactive application of such reductions for defendants without a prior serious violent felony conviction, after a court considers certain factors. It also establishes a consecutive mandatory prison term for a defendant who commits a drug offense involving a detectable amount of heroin or fentanyl. The bill makes the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 retroactive to permit resentencing of a convicted crack cocaine offender sentenced before August 3, 2010.

The Recidivism Risk Reduction Act (H.R. 759)

This bill modifies programs in federal prisons to reduce recidivism. The bill directs the Department of Justice to develop training and educational programs, develop rehabilitation programs, implement changes to risk assessment evaluations, pre-release supervision programs, and expand “good behavior” sentencing reductions. This bill contains many similarities to Title II of the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act before the U.S. Senate (which we lobbied for).

Let’s ask Representative Lucas:

Please co-sponsor H.R. 3713 and H.R. 759 and help bring them to the House floor.

Possible Talking Points:

1. There are too many people serving long sentences for non-violent drug crimes.
2. We need to help prisoners re-enter their communities.
3. These bills will save taxpayers money by reducing the number of people in federal prisons.

Call Representative Frank Lucas 202-225-5565