

LOBBYING AND ADVOCACY

Similarities and Differences

People sometimes confuse the words “lobbying” and “advocacy.” The legal definition of lobbying usually involves attempting to influence legislation. Advocacy covers a much broader range of activities that might or might not include lobbying. One way of differentiating between the two terms is to understand that lobbying always involves advocacy but advocacy does not necessarily involve lobbying.

For example, a group might picket or boycott a store to stop it from selling a particular product. That action is advocacy and it might result in the store discontinuing sale of the product.

If that advocacy is not successful, the group might, as a next step, urge the city council to pass an ordinance prohibiting sale of the product. That action, to influence legislation, is lobbying.

Lobbying is only a small part of the advocacy carried out by nonprofits. Almost all social change has started with non-lobbying advocacy but ended with major lobbying efforts.

For example, the civil rights movement included sit-ins, marches, and other forms of protest, which were advocating for equal rights. Ultimately, that advocacy led to the enactment, through extensive lobbying, of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

This kind of citizen action has been carried out repeatedly over the years by citizen groups working for the protection of women’s rights, child labor laws, stricter laws against drunk driving and smoking, requirements for safe drinking water and clean air, disabled persons’ rights, and many more. All initially combined a broad spectrum of non-lobbying advocacy activities, with lobbying employed somewhat later to achieve the needed change in public policy.