



# GOVERNMENT RELATIONS AND CHRISTIAN CAMPING

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How engagement with legislators can serve your ministry



■ by Tucker Van Brunt

Positive relationships with lawmakers are critical for the sustainability of camp ministry. Whether advocating for helpful legislation, speaking out about unnecessarily restrictive legislation or getting access to public funds for ministry, knowing how to skillfully do all of this is essential. ▶

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Many CCCA members across the country are already engaged in advocacy in their state and local governments. It's through engagement at the local, state and federal levels that Christian camps and conference centers can advocate for positive change.

For several years, CCCA has sought expert guidance in government relations to help equip camp and conference leaders to deal with regulations that may hinder members' operations. Most recently, as part of CCCA's government advocacy initiative, the organization has enlisted the help of Anne Basham, founder of Ascend Consulting, a Washington, D.C.-based lobbying firm with many years of experience in coaching clients and lobbying the federal government on their behalf.

CCCA wants to ensure that all its members are equipped to engage in policymaking. In this article, we'll look at the experiences of a couple CCCA members and provide tips for you to act on your camp or conference center's behalf (and on behalf of Christian camping, in general).

### Joining Forces

There's power in numbers. A group of camps coming together in a state provides a strong network of like-minded organizations with similar goals and issues, creating larger visibility when standing together on an issue or benefit for the industry. Many states across the U.S. have groups like this that include Christian and secular camps and other organizations that serve youth.

Networks like California Collaboration for Youth (CCFY) and Colorado Camps Network (CCN) provide a vital support infrastructure for camps. When local coalitions build vital relationships with officials, the outcome can be powerful. It's important to build credibility and context behind the awareness being built with those officials. "Make the health department your best friend," said Doug McClain, vice president of operations at Sky Ranch (Westcliffe, Colorado), who is engaged with CCN.

McClain explained, "We've been trying to get legislators to camp ... to understand camp and how we impact lives." It's by building those relationships and exposing those leaders to camp that "when things come up and you can say, 'Hey, remember me? ... This is going to kill my camp' in an email," McClain said. When they see your camp firsthand, legislators better understand why they should write an exclusion into a bill that will negatively affect camps.

When you understand and are engaged in what is happening in the legislature, you don't have to take a reactive, damage-control approach. In addition, you can be an organization that comes to mind when legislators are navigating the best ways to serve communities.

"We're governed by the department of early childhood, so by building relationships, CCN has been the go-to organization for the Colorado Department of Early Childhood when they have questions about things."

CCCA has compiled a list of known organizations across the country. Visit [www.ccca.org/go/coalitions](http://www.ccca.org/go/coalitions) to access the list. If you're aware of groups that are not included on our list, please notify our member engagement team by emailing [ehughes@ccca.org](mailto:ehughes@ccca.org). ▶



(Left to Right): Jon Labadie, Michael Best Strategies, Colorado Camps Network lobbyist, State Government Relations; Rhonda Mickelson, CCN Board Member, Cheley Colorado Camps; Steve Fenberg, Colorado Senate President; David Secunda, CCN Board Member, Avid4 Adventure; Heather Mrozek Novak, Avid4Adventure; and Isabel Browning.

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(Left to Right): Carin Rosa, Colorado Department of Early Childhood, Director of Division of Early Learning Licensing and Administration; Isabel Browning, Girl Scouts Colorado; Rhonda Mickelson, CCN Board Member, Cheley Colorado Camps; and David Secunda, Colorado Camps Network Board Member, Avid4 Adventure.

(Left to Right): Gregg Hunter, president/CEO of CCCA; Anne Basham, CEO of Ascend Consultants; and Gabe Valencia, CEO of Mile High Pines, CCCA board chair.



## CCCA on Capitol Hill

*Updates from Washington, D.C.*

■ by Gregg Hunter

CCCA board chair Gabe Valencia and I went to Washington, D.C., in May to meet with elected officials and their staff members. This was done as part of CCCA's government advocacy initiative. Our lobbyist, Anne Basham, CEO of Ascend Consultants, facilitated and scheduled our meetings on Capitol Hill.

One meeting was with Representative Robert Aderholt from Alabama. He is the chairman of the Values Action Team (VAT), which holds a powerful, closed-door monthly meeting that our lobbyist attends on our behalf. Rep. Aderholt is also chairman of the Committee on Labor Health and Human Services and Education. He is very invested in issues surrounding religious liberties. The Congressman attended the meeting personally and brought four staffers with him. We also discussed the critical issue of insurance coverage for camps and the role legislators could play in helping camps. We often hear about the slow pace at which government moves, but I saw several instances of lawmakers saying, "Yeah, that makes sense. I can do that," about sending a letter, suggesting an amendment or introducing legislation.

It gave me hope that in the future, we (CCCA) may be able to meet with lawmakers, propose language for a bill or an amendment to a law and if it makes sense, we may receive support. It reminds me of a time years ago when I went to the Colorado Senate majority leader and said, "Amy, there's a bad law on the books for camps, and I wonder if you can help." I explained it to her, and she replied, "That is a bad law; let's get it changed." And she did.

All of this makes me believe it's important for CCCA to be present in the halls of government, at the federal level, for sure, but also at the state level, through member engagement.



(Left to Right): Gregg Hunter, president/CEO of CCCA; Representative Robert Aderholt (Alabama); and Gabe Valencia, CEO of Mile High Pines, CCCA board chair.

### Colorado Camps Network

McClain keeps an ear to the ground in the Colorado House as part of the Colorado Camps Network (CCN). The group, made up of both Christian and secular camps, pays dues which are used toward a lobbyist. The lobbyist sits in the House, staying ahead of the gavel by keeping an eye out for bills which may create positive or negative impacts on their network.

CCN is strategically taking a proactive, rather than a reactive, approach in the Colorado House. According to McClain, when their lobbyist flags something, it's put in an email for the network to review. "The board reads the proposed bill and [decides whether or not] it will affect camps," McClain explained.

As is the case in many states, "Camps get lumped in with childcare and school ... so much of our state's rules and regulations were [primarily] written toward in-home daycare centers in the greater Denver area." McClain continues. "It's just not applicable to day camps or residential camps."

By being involved at the genesis of proposed bills, CCN is in the know, which means in some cases the network is granted the opportunity for camps to endorse and request support of, or flag concern for those representing them on the floor.

Some of the contents within these bills could result in a simple, yet cumbersome administrative burden or re-align how a camp approaches upcoming operations entirely. Often, these bills are written and processed by people who aren't familiar with unique situations for camps as they get lumped in with other youth-based organizations (like schools).

McClain provided a specific case as an example. "One of the things CCN was able to do was get an exemption for seasonal residential camps and outdoor educational staff members ... As we're one of those states with a minimum wage of \$16 per hour, and the law wanting to make counselors paid hourly, this is a huge win for us being able to stay afloat in what we charge campers in the end."

Another notable case in Colorado is the *Miller vs. Crested Butte* lawsuit between a family and the well-known ski resort. CCN is weighing in on this because the lawsuit jeopardizes the validity of liability and waivers for recreational organizations, like camps.

"Parents are suing the ski resort saying it's null and void for a parent to sign a waiver on behalf of their child," McClain shared. "If I can't sign a waiver on behalf of my child, no one is going to be in business anymore; it has huge ramifications for camps."

McClain explained, "Why would I want to do business as an operator if there's no freedom from liability if parents can't accept risk for their minor?" McClain noted that CCN joined together and took a stance. "We tagged our name on it and said, 'We do not support this. We think there should be waivers and parents should be able to sign them.'" ▶

As part of the California Collaboration for Youth (CCFY), Gabe Valencia, CEO of Mile High Pines (Angelus Oaks, California), has found great benefit to working with groups that are not just faith-based.

# It's OK (and encouraged) to approach your officials.



## Navigating Public Policy Advocacy

### *6 steps for nonprofits*

According to Anne Basham and Ascend Consulting, in the dynamic landscape of nonprofit organizations, effective public policy advocacy is a cornerstone for driving positive change. Basham has developed a guide for nonprofits to effectively engage in public policy advocacy.

From the guide, here are six essential steps to help nonprofits navigate the intricacies of public policy advocacy successfully:

1. Clarify your advocacy goals. What specific policies or changes do you seek to influence? Clearly articulate the desired outcomes and the impact they will have on your mission.
2. Stay informed. Regularly monitor policy developments at local, state and federal levels. Knowledge is the foundation of effective advocacy.
3. Cultivate relationships with legislators. Identify key decision-makers at various levels of government who have the ability to influence the policies you're advocating for.
4. Craft a compelling message. Use real-life stories, data and evidence to illustrate the impact of the policies you support. Tailor your message to different audiences to maximize its relevance and impact.
5. Coordinate grassroots engagement. Collective action is at the heart of effective advocacy. A united front is a powerful force that can impact the decisions of elected officials greatly. Mobilize your community, including staff, volunteers and supporters.
6. Maximize social media and mass communications. Combine traditional methods, such as meetings with policymakers and written communications, with modern approaches like social media campaigns and grassroots organizing.

You can download the entire guide from Ascend Consulting, filled with Q & As and more resources at [www.ccca.org/go/advocacy](http://www.ccca.org/go/advocacy).



## California Coalition for Youth

Gabe Valencia, CEO of Mile High Pines (Angelus Oaks, California) and CCCA's board chair, shared that there's not only value, but also tremendous influence that comes with forming these in-state camping networks, especially beyond the Christian bubble.

As part of the California Collaboration for Youth (CCFY), which is similar in structure to that of CCN in Colorado, Valencia has found great benefit to working with groups that are not just faith-based. "If there were only Christians in our coalition, we wouldn't have the same type of clout when we walk into the State offices." But, he noted, by "including other youth-serving organizations ... like Campfire USA or scouting, we have a whole lot more people who stand and lock arms with you on the majority of issues you face."

Valencia has found great value working with like-minded organizations and people "to gain some sort of compromise through diplomacy when it doesn't necessarily affect issues of 'faith first.' It's OK to work on things like ... exemptions to high wages." When presented with an issue from the legislature, Valencia suggested, "If it's a Christian issue, work alone or with other Christian ministries. If it's an issue we all agree on, work together and you'll have more backing and more power."

There's a diplomatic balance that needs to be kept at the forefront when collaborating with non-Christian organizations in an ever-evolving culture. Valencia noted that when faith-based issues arise, to maintain healthy relationships between those he's working with, collaborations have a built-in "exit strategy" that everyone agrees upon.

Every quarter, CCFY meets to discuss bills they've been following or new ones that pop up. Most of the time, according to Valencia, there's unison in the network when a regulation is up for discussion (unless it's something that crosses into faith issues).

CCFY's biggest success has been in camp regulations. Valencia explained, "They were outdated until CCFY decided to help the local health department, and state, craft the most current guidelines." He said that these are "guidelines the camps have agreed to, to be used by the state to measure what they're doing well and healthy." Valencia pointed out that the guidelines were written by the CCFY team, approved by the health department and ratified by the California House.

"Can you imagine saying, 'You want laws, and to feel safe, and make sure the camp is feeling healthy? We'll craft the regulations and make sure we hold ourselves to that standard,'" Valencia said.

## Where To Start

It's OK (and encouraged) to approach your officials. According to Anne Basham, founder of Ascend Consulting, CCCA's lobbying organization, there are several tips to building relationships and communicating with legislators, whether local, state or federal. First, become familiar with legislators and what's important to them.

Valencia said CCFY embraces opportunities to interact with elected officials. "Once a year, our group goes [to] build relationships at our state capitol." If there is anything in the hopper that may pertain to the network, whether positive or negative, Valencia explained, "We leave a white paper behind that says, 'If you see these things, we love them,' and 'If you see these things, they may not be things we'd like you to support.'"

When communicating with legislators, Basham said to clearly and concisely articulate your priorities and goals, provide context, write it down and keep it simple. "Be brief. One of the most common advocacy mistakes is to explain a problem at length. If you need to provide additional information," Basham explained, "put it in a one- to two-page summary. Generally, one brief story (one to two minutes) and several compelling statistics are most impactful."

Also, Basham recommends that you stay on target, understand what you're asking and have a proposed solution before going forward. "Have a clear 'ask,'" Basham said. "Lawmakers write legislation, fund projects or open oversight inquiries on other government agencies, so propose a solution to your problem that they can provide. Even if the solution isn't feasible, it will be a good basis for developing another solution."

Basham believes that the tangible fruits from these relationships may not only shield your organization from detrimental regulations but also keep you in the know about government funding. These relationships can increase your camp's awareness of positive financial opportunities.

"Offices are often willing to write letters of support from the member of Congress about your organization, which is helpful in grant applications, Basham explained. "Community leaders' letters of support can make a significant impact in receiving funding from new donors," Basham said. In addition, offices may be able to provide earmarked appropriations for projects. "If they know and trust your organization, this is helpful in securing federal funding," Basham shared. ■



*For 15 years, Tucker Van Brunt lived onsite at Camp Sentinel (Center Tuftonboro, New Hampshire) with his family and discovered at a young age his passion for camping ministry. Obtaining a bachelor's degree in communication arts with a focus in marketing and public relations from Gordon College in 2021, Tucker has been applying his marketing skills to Sentinel for many years. Tucker currently resides in Newburyport, Massachusetts.*