

# Community Building Advocacy Guide



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Fighting harmful benefits tech systems may involve different kinds of tactics used in different combinations. Here, we introduce some formal and informal ways for people most affected by benefits tech systems, and other advocates, to participate in policy decisions. We have written a brief introduction to these tactics and split them up into three documents: (1) Public Participation Advocacy Guide; (2) Community Building Advocacy Guide; and (3) Media Advocacy Guide. You must decide what is right for your situation—we are not recommending or encouraging any specific action. You can use more than one tactic at a time. We know there are lots of details we might be leaving out and hope this list will grow as we learn from each other.

Also, we have left out some tactics that we discuss in other resources, like Public Records Requests and Administrative Fair Hearings. Lawsuits are another tactic, but the specifics of lawsuits change from situation to situation. Please take a look at our Case Study Library to see if something matches your situation. Finally, feel free to contact the Hub team (insert link to Get Involved page} for more specific information (we cannot give legal advice, but we may be able to provide helpful information).

## Ongoing Public Participation and Building Community

The formal participation points described in the Public Participation Advocacy Guide—where the government must listen to the public through formal procedures—are not the only ways for people to participate in the policy-making process. People can try to build community and participate with public officials in other ways.

### Consider contacting elected officials

People affected by benefits tech systems have the right to contact their elected officials for any matters of concern. You can find a list of your elected officials here: <https://myreps.datamade.us/>. Most likely, the elected officials with the most influence over a decision about benefits tech systems are your governor and your state senators or representatives (you may need to go to your state legislature’s website to find your state senator and/or representative). Your federal senator and/or representative might also play a role. **Focus on the most important points you want to make when you speak with elected officials. They might not have time for too many details.**

## Consider contacting agency officials

Some state agency officials may be available to talk with people the agency serves or provide information about the benefits tech system. However, these officials probably will not have the power to fix problems on their own. You can ask them to connect you with the agency officials who have that power.

## Consider an agency complaint process

Some agencies have formal ways to send complaints. Usually, this is limited to an individual's personal situation (for example, an agency worker discriminated against you, was rude, could not be reached, or made a bad decision). Look into whether the agency complaint process might also work for rules, contracts, or policy decisions. If you file a complaint, the agency might be legally required to respond.

## Connect with others who are affected by the same government action

Benefits tech systems affect huge numbers of people—from several thousand to potentially millions—at the same time. Together, you can share information, connect to other resources, and think about the best way to win change.

- **Social media groups and message boards.** Social media groups, especially on Facebook, have been a key source of information about benefits like Medicaid, SNAP, and Unemployment for a long time. The pandemic has increased the number of groups available and people's willingness to engage. Consider starting or joining a group about your issue to connect with others. Also, Reddit might have a discussion thread about the issue you're facing.

**Warning:** Much of the information in social media groups or message boards is incomplete or false. Always verify the information you get there.

**Warning:** Do **not** share personal information publicly on these sites (no Social Security Numbers, government ID numbers like Medicaid numbers, birthdates, case information, etc.).

- **Share news stories.** Sharing news stories on social media or other sources with some personal context from you (why you care about the story) can be helpful in connecting to others affected by the same issue.

- **Online news stories and comments.** Some traditional media outlets have the ability to comment on news stories posted online. If there's a news story about your particular issue, commenting and reviewing the comments can be a way of connecting with others.

**Warning:** The comments sections of news stories can be full of cruel or hateful comments, especially when the stories involve people experiencing poverty. Be careful when reading the comments and connecting to others through comments.

- **Hold in-person events for sharing and education.** It may be difficult to organize an in-person event involving benefits tech systems, but it is worth considering. An event can be useful if the issue affects lots of people and has had media coverage, or if you've already found an audience of interested people (even if small). Often, libraries or community centers will offer free or low-cost meeting space. Helpful topics include what's going on, why it's important, what rights people have, and how to fight back.

Also, consider making time in the agenda to give the people who come the chance to share their stories. This can be an important way of connecting with others, seeing how different people's experiences are similar, and figuring out what the common issues are. As part of the event, you can get people's contact information so you can keep in touch, but make sure to get their permission first.

**Note:** Do your best to make the event as accessible as possible to people who have disabilities, who primarily speak a language other than English, or who lack transportation. Remote platforms like Zoom can help people participate who cannot come to the meeting in person and can even broadcast directly to social media. Zoom also has real-time automatic captioning.

**Warning:** Please consider the safety of in-person gatherings during the pandemic. Gathering may be altogether unsafe, especially for people who are immunocompromised. Consider expectations for masking, vaccination, and ventilation. Let the audience know what you expect of them and what safety measures you're putting in place. You can also add a remote option for people who can't be there in-person.

- **Attend farmers' markets, health fairs, or other community events.**

Being present at events held by others can be a way of connecting. If you contact the organizers in advance, you may be able to have a table at the event. Even if not, you might bring a sign or flyers with information about the issue. Include your contact information if you want people to get in touch with you later.

## **Consider what action the group should take**

Your group will be in the best place to decide what is right for your situation; we do not recommend or encourage any particular course of action. People affected by government action have been known to organize letter-writing or call-in campaigns, start petitions, join government committees that allow for public participation, show up in groups to government meetings or legislative hearings, plan rallies, draft legislation, protest, write newspaper editorials, raise public awareness through community education, or participate in lawsuits.

## **Consider making the group more formal**

Depending on what the group members want to do, it could make sense to take steps to become formal. The group can adopt rules called “bylaws” for how the group runs or chooses leaders. Or, for even more formality, the group could incorporate as a non-profit or advocacy organization. Ask a lawyer about these possibilities (your local legal aid or law school clinic may be able to help).

## **Ask community organizers or professional advocates to get involved**

Fighting government action is a lot for anyone to handle. There might be community organizers or professional advocates who care about these issues and have experience fighting. Consider contacting them to see if they can work with you on the issue. Here are some organizations to consider reaching out to: community organizing groups, tenants' rights organizations, legal aid organizations, disability rights organizations, peace and justice centers, Appleseed organizations (<https://www.appleseednetwork.org/>), and unions.

**Note:** Many community organizers and professional advocates have limited resources and may not be able to take on a new issue in a short period of time. If you want to partner with them, try to reach out early

on. Don't be discouraged if they can't join you right away. Keep in touch and keep them updated. Give them plenty of advance warning of any deadlines or events you want them to come to. You can ask them about their needs and the kinds of support they can provide (like giving presentations, writing letters, or hosting events), so it will be easier to work with them.

### **If you partner with community organizers or professional advocates, make a plan to work together**

You, members of your community, and professional advocates have different strengths, skills, and resources. Talk honestly about what your goals are, the time frames for action, general approaches to strategy, and what role each person or organization can play. Some non-profit organizations, including many legal aid programs, may be restricted by law from attempting to influence legislation or engaging in grassroots lobbying. But, they may still be able to provide legal representation, hold community education events or forums, share information with the communities they serve, educate public officials about public policy, work with others to broaden knowledge of the issue, or use traditional or social media to publicize the issue.

## **Conclusion**

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to your advocacy, and we are not recommending or encouraging any specific action. Consider what is right for your situation and try it out. Please let us know how your tactics work out and share ideas for improving this guide by emailing us at [email address].

**Note:** If you are an advocate who works for an organization funded by the Legal Services Corporation, these advocacy tactics are still available, but you must consider federal regulations. For a discussion of the applicable regulations and examples of permissible advocacy, please see this article: Soren Dal Rasmussen and Kevin De Liban, Narrating Justice: Client-Centered Media Advocacy, Clearinghouse Community, August 2018 (link: [https://clinical.aals.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/05/media\\_articles.pdf](https://clinical.aals.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/05/media_articles.pdf))



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