



**Depression and Bipolar
Support Alliance**

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Chapter Advocacy Guide

Defining Advocacy

The word advocacy means different things to different people, ranging from holding a bake sale for a local school to helping a person fight for their legal rights. There are two common forms of advocacy: self-advocacy and public policy or legislative advocacy.

Self-Advocacy

Many peers already advocate for themselves while navigating their everyday life. Starting or attending a Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) support group, questioning a health insurance explanation of benefits, and sharing life experiences as a person with a mood disorder are all expressions of advocacy. This is often referred to as personal or self-advocacy.

Public Policy or Legislative Advocacy

While DBSA community members have a long history of championing personal advocacy, we have also been at the forefront in determining needs and best practices for delivery and access to mental health services for peers. This is sometimes referred to as community advocacy. Taking action to influence public policy at the state and federal levels is the goal of this type of advocacy.

Why Advocate?

As a person living with a mental health condition, or a family member, you have may have experienced discrimination. Discrimination can take many forms. It may manifest as a barrier to

- quality health care
- equal employment opportunities
- obtaining appropriate social assistance
- embracing who you are without fear of being labeled
- living life in wellness

DBSA is dedicated to eliminating obstacles that prevent our community from full engagement in society. Regardless of any barrier—government regulations, resource allocation, workforce policies, or cultural norms—discrimination should not be tolerated. Becoming an active participant in advocacy is a great way to get your voice heard and affect change.

Stronger as a Community of Advocates

We as individuals are ultimately responsible for protecting our own rights, but we are stronger together. DBSA recognizes that by working together, we are in a better position to ensure that

- the peer voice is not only heard, but requested and expected during discussions on national and local mental health policy issues;
- discrimination is eliminated and people living with mood disorders are embraced without fear in the arenas of mental health care, employment, and housing;
- influence over state and local legislative and regulatory bodies is realized through the establishment of state advocacy organizations.

By creating a community of advocates, we are in a position to learn from each other and other partners who share a common vision of affecting positive change around issues faced by people living with mood disorders. Today, DBSA advocates are

- creating local and national relationships with partner organizations;
- serving on state, local, and federal policy committees and commissions;
- visiting their elected officials, asking them to promote legislation that supports access to quality mental health care;
- publishing position papers and telling their story on blogs, YouTube channels, and traditional media outlets.

How to Get Involved

Tell Your Story

Nothing is a more powerful agent for change than sharing your personal experiences in ways that demand attention. We invite you to visit DBSA's Advocacy Center (DBSAAlliance.org/help_advocacy_center) to get started. At this site you can subscribe to the DBSA Making Mental Health Matter monthly newsletter and receive action alerts that will inform you on topics that require immediate outreach to local and national public and elected officials.

Advocate as a Host of a Support Group

Hosting a support group is an excellent way to get started in advocacy. Here, individuals learn that they are not alone and how to advocate for themselves. They can talk about how they personally deal with discrimination and stigma in space that is safe and respectful.

Adopt DBSA's Recommended Language and Core Beliefs as an Advocacy Tool

Your chapter can further advocacy by considering your language and allowing DBSA's core beliefs to drive your activities. Language alone can deter discrimination, and by setting an example for your support group participants, you can begin to affect real change in your community.

DBSA recommends using language that is peer-centered, strength-based, self-directed, and wellness-focused. For example, DBSA recommends that you say, "I live with depression," rather than, "I suffer from depression." Changing just a couple of words shifts the focus of the conversation from illness to wellness. You can encourage the use of this type of language and gently give alternatives when needed.

DBSA has also documented its collective beliefs which form a foundation for unified, consistent messages about mood disorders and the people who live with them. Adopting these beliefs and sharing them with your support group participants can help dispel discrimination and stigma. The first belief, for example, says "People living with depression and bipolar disorder can and

do lead productive and thriving lives.” The meaning of productive and thriving is, of course, unique to each individual, but the underlying message stays the same: people with a mood disorder are worthy and important members of our community.

Standing for DBSA’s Core Beliefs is a powerful advocacy tool. [DBSA’s Chapter Branding Guide](#) explains language concerns and the organizational core beliefs in detail. Consider reading, understanding, living, and sharing the elements presented there.

Provide Education as an Avenue for Advocacy

Your chapter can also be a powerful advocate by providing educational opportunities for your chapter and the public. Sometimes stigma and discrimination may stem from a lack of knowledge of mood disorders. Demystifying these conditions can shift the focus and tone of conversations to one of hope and understanding.

Your chapter may choose to [distribute educational](#) brochures to your community, present a program, such as [Living Successfully with a Mood Disorder](#), or share your knowledge at public events, such as health fairs. All advocacy efforts can help make a real difference for individuals living with a mood disorder as well as their friends and family.

Learn About Mental Health Parity

Due to changes in laws governing health insurance plans, most plans must now offer mental health coverage and provide benefits equal to what is offered for other medical conditions. This is known as mental health parity. Visit DBSAAlliance.org/help_advocate_parity to learn more about parity and the ways you can support others in obtaining the mental health benefits to which they are entitled under the law. As a chapter, you might consider discussing parity within your support group and, potentially, working with an expert in this area to provide a presentation to your chapter and/or the public at large. The more people know about their rights, the more they can advocate for themselves and others.

Promote the Value of Peer Support Services

Peer support services are an evidence-based model of care for individuals recovering from a mental health or substance use condition. Qualified peer support specialists working as part of a clinical team deliver these services and provide hope and inspiration; increased funding will support lives of wellness for millions. Chapters can help promote the value of peer support services by sharing [training opportunities hosted by DBSA](#) and promoting the community building at the [Peer Leadership Center](#). Learn more about how DBSA is advocating for advancement of these vital, life-saving services by visiting <http://cqrcengage.com/dbsa/peersupportservices>.

Encourage Participation in the Care for Your Mind Blog

DBSA publishes a weekly education and advocacy blog, with new posts appearing on Tuesdays. Share each week’s post at a chapter meeting and encourage participants to join the conversation on the blog site. Blog topics can even be used as meeting discussion starters. Sample topics include:

- national mental health reform
- alternatives to emergency room care
- success in the workplace
- postpartum depression
- everyone can be an advocate

Learn more at: <http://careforyourmind.org>.

Understand DBSA's Advocacy Policies

DBSA creates and promotes messages, structures, and practices that advance mental health, personal choice, and wellness. We also support both policy and media related advocacy at national and state levels, ensuring the place, needs, and concerns of peers in policy, service delivery, and treatment decisions. Visit [DBSAAlliance.org/help_advocacy_policies](https://www.dbsaalliance.org/help_advocacy_policies) to learn more. We encourage chapters to understand DBSA's policies and to share them with your participants.

Understand Advocacy

At the beginning of this document, we talked about two common definitions for advocacy. To read more about these definitions as well as the legislative process, discrimination, the importance of advocacy, advocacy myths, and the Affordable Health Care Act, visit [DBSAAlliance.org/help_understanding_advocacy](https://www.dbsaalliance.org/help_understanding_advocacy).

Become a Legislative Advocate

Communicating with your legislators is a great way to have your voice heard. You can communicate by letter, phone call, or with a personal visit. To learn more about becoming a legislative advocate, please visit [DBSAAlliance.org/help_advocacy_become_an_advocate](https://www.dbsaalliance.org/help_advocacy_become_an_advocate). As a chapter, consider subscribing to our email alerts so that you can participate and encourage others to do the same in grassroots advocacy at <http://cqcengage.com/dbsa/>.

Review DBSA's Advocacy Toolkit

Visit [DBSAAlliance.org/help_advocacy_toolkit](https://www.dbsaalliance.org/help_advocacy_toolkit) for helpful samples and resource links related to advocacy.

Take Action / Participate in Grassroots Advocacy

Visit cqcengage.com/dbsa/ to see what DBSA is doing at the state level to improve access to mental health care and reduce the stigma that keeps so many from obtaining care. You will learn more there about these efforts and can sign up for email notifications.

DBSA works with grassroots organizations in several states to advance this type of advocacy. To learn what is happening in your state and who to contact to learn more, go to cqcengage.com/dbsa/ and click on your state under *state issues*. If you are interested in starting a grassroots organization in your state, please contact DBSA's Advocacy Vice President, Phyllis Foxworth, at pfoxworth@DBSAAlliance.org.