# Media Advocacy Guide

## Traditional and Social Media

BENEFITS TECH ADVOCACY HUB

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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 for more specific information (**we cannot give legal advice, but we may be able to provide helpful information**).

# Traditional Media Advocacy

Media is a way to publicize the issues you are seeing with benefits tech so that more affected people learn about available resources, sympathetic people learn more about the issues, and government officials take note. Local reporters are often interested in harms to people who live in the state and they can get government officials to answer questions that people getting benefits or their advocates cannot. National reporters are often interested in particularly bad state actions or trends where multiple states are all doing something.

- **Figure out which reporters cover issues like yours.** Not all reporters cover all things. Try to find out which reporters and news outlets cover issues like yours by reading articles and noting their authors.
- **Think about the audience that the reporter is writing for or presenting to.** Some reporters might be talking to a general audience (like the local TV news). Some are more specialized towards specific topics (like business or health). Some might be trying to reach older or younger audiences or audiences with particular kinds of beliefs. Or, they might be telling individual stories as part of a series on a bigger topic, like state agencies limiting access to benefits, health care, technology's role in life, or the latest activities by the legislature. Thinking about the reporters' audiences will help you find the right reporter and think about how to tell your story.
- **Think about what story you want to tell.** If something harmful has already happened, what is the impact of that on your life? If the government is considering something that might be harmful, what do you think the impact will be? How does this affect others? Is the issue connected to a bigger-picture topic of interest (for example, a state's legislative session, budget cuts, or problems with the state's Medicaid or Unemployment system)? Is the issue affecting certain groups of people (for example, Black, Latine, Indigenous or other people of color; LGBTQ+ people; children; people with certain conditions; or people in certain parts of the state)? Write down the main points of the story. Think about how to explain a complex issue to someone who does not know much about the topic. You do not need to write the story for the reporter—just organize your main points to match what the reporter may be most interested in.

- **Match your story to the best reporter for it and approach respectfully.** Reporters' phone numbers and emails are usually available from their stories or their outlet's website. Try calling or emailing. Be prepared with a brief explanation of the issue and your story idea. The reporter may not be interested in your story right now or may simply have too many other things to cover—so do not take it personally if they say no. Thank them for their time and ask them if it is okay to contact them again in the future. Ask them if they know of other reporters who might be interested now. Plan for it to take some time before you find a reporter with the interest and time to cover your story.

- **If a reporter agrees to cover your story, prepare for the interview.** Focus on the most important points. If you have important documents, make copies to share with the reporter. If there is something you do not want to be in the story, ask the reporter before sharing the information for it to be "off the record" and make sure the reporter agrees (just telling the reporter that something is "off the record" does not make it so; you should assume the reporter will use any information you give them unless the reporter specifically agrees not to).

  **Note:** If you are involved in a lawsuit (or think you might soon be), know that whatever you say in an interview could affect your lawsuit. Check with your attorney before giving the interview or reaching out to reporters.

- **Give the reporter ideas for other people to interview or questions to ask.** Reporters will appreciate any ideas you have for other people to interview or questions to ask. For other people to interview, think about people who will add something different to the story—maybe someone else directly affected in a different way, an organizer, a professional advocate, or a professor who studies the issue (also, it is good to ask the person ahead of time if it is okay to share their contact info with the reporter). For the questions to ask, think about what you want to know from government officials who have not given clear answers before.

- **Ask the reporter to check with you to make sure your part of the story is correct.** Usually, a reporter will write the story on their own after interviewing everyone. Nobody the reporter talked to has a right to review a story before it is published. Whatever you said during your interview is fair game, and you should try to make sure you give good information the first time around. But, if you had a long interview, talked about a lot of different things, got confused, or think you said something that was not correct, you can ask the reporter to check in with you before publishing to make sure that the reporter is accurately reporting your part of the story. But do not be surprised if the reporter says no.
- **Read the story when it comes out and follow up with the reporter.** You cannot expect the story to be written just the way you want it, but you can expect it to be fair and accurate. If there is something that is unfair, misleading, or false, talk respectfully about it with the reporter. If you think the reporter did a good job, let the reporter know. If you do not show up in the story even though you were interviewed, you can respectfully ask the reporter why.
- **Share the story with your communities.** When you share a story you were involved in, add some context so that your communities will know why it is important and how the issue affects you. Also, do not worry if a lot of people do not read it right away. You can wait for a couple days and share the story again. If you share it more than once, provide some different context or talk about a different part of the story.
- **Use the stories in your advocacy.** Sometimes, you can take new information a government official gave in a news story and follow up on it with a public records request. Or, you might want to share the story with an elected official to explain an issue that affects you. You may also want to share the story as part of an effort to get others to take some particular kind of action (for example, asking them to share the story with their friends or to come to an event you are putting on).
- **See if the same reporter wants to keep writing about your issue.** The same reporter might have other ideas for stories about the same issue. Be helpful if you can. And, if you get other ideas for stories about the same issue, share them with the reporter.

- **Consider other news outlets.** Now that you have a story you can point to, outlets with different audiences might be interested. Consider whether it makes sense to reach out to them. This is especially true when you have a print article—you can share it with radio outlets to see if they want to cover the issue.

  **Note:** Be fair to the reporters you work with, and honest about what you can and cannot do. If you are going to work with a different reporter on the same issue, let the previous reporter know why (especially if the previous reporter is still interested in the same issue).

- **Build long-term relationships with reporters.** Working with the media does not always happen quickly or produce immediate results. But all the work can pay off in the long run. Once you have a relationship with a reporter, check in with them occasionally. Ask them what they are thinking about or paying attention to. Keep them updated on what is going on with your issue.

# Social Media Advocacy

You do not have to wait on traditional media to start getting the word out about your issue. Here are some basic ideas—many people will have more detailed ideas and specific suggestions. Also, remember that what you say or do on social media might be watched by your opponents and could come up in later advocacy or if you are part of a lawsuit.

- **Post about what is happening with the goal to engage and inform.** Because benefits tech systems often fly under the radar, many people might not know about the system or its problems, even if they are aware of the benefit program (like Medicaid, SNAP, or Unemployment) that the system is being used for. Share facts about what is happening and why it is harmful.
- **You do not have to explain everything at once.** It is hard to keep people's attention in a long post. You might want to set a schedule to post about things. Share new facts or details over several posts spread out over time.
- **Consider using video in different ways.** High-quality cameras and editing apps are increasingly available and there are lots of ways to creatively use video on social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok.
    1. **Basic explanation.** You might want to use video to explain something instead of writing it out.
    2. **Showing the impact.** You might be able to show the way an algorithm is making a decision or show the impact of the decision on you.
    3. **Creative expression.** You might be able to make your point in some creative way through TikTok-like re-enactments of a conversation or situation. Or, you might record and post art that touches on your topics (dance, songs, poetry, etc.).

4. **Documentary-style piece.** You might put together (or hire people to put together) a short documentary-style piece about the issue. This can be a video-centered piece that incorporates interviews with affected people, some explanatory text, and information about how to connect or participate.

#### WARNINGS ABOUT VIDEO

> **Be careful if you are recording other people.** States have different laws about who can be recorded and whether or not you need their permission.
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> **Bad actors can use your videos and photos in different ways.** When you post a public video or photo of yourself on social media, it is available to anyone. This includes strangers who may be rude, and also could include government employees or police officers. It's important to think about whether your post includes private information or information that could be used against you.
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> **Try to make sure your videos are accessible to people with disabilities and people who primarily speak a language other than English.** You can caption the video so that people can read along while watching. You can also translate the captions or provide a transcript in other languages.

- **Keep your bigger goal in mind.** Social media advocacy can be used to help you achieve a bigger goal in your fight against the benefits tech system. Getting lots of views, engagements, and followers is exciting, but that is not always valuable by itself. Think about ways that you can turn that into an advocacy advantage: increasing turnout at events, attracting the notice of government officials, getting reporters interested in your story, building fundraising capacity, etc.

# Conclusion

This guide covers a lot of possible tactics you can use in your advocacy. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, 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 contacting us.

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)

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