



Innovate to Motivate

The National Conference for Political Involvement Professionals

2014 December 9–11, 2014 New Orleans

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Nominated Organization

Feeding America

Name of Person Submitting the Nomination

Brett Weisel

Submitter's Phone Number and Email Address

312-641-6554

bweisel@feedingamerica.org

Name of Program Manager/Senior Administrator

Brett Weisel

Is the nomination for grassroots, PAC or technology?

Grassroots

What is the innovation?

One of the lasting challenges many advocacy professionals face is how to effectively measure a program's impact and success, particularly in an era of legislative deadlock where policy wins are fewer and further between. As a nonprofit, Feeding America must be particularly responsive to developing strong, outcomes-based metrics to get funding, secure budget, and demonstrate the value of our grassroots program amongst the various organizational priorities. As a result, Feeding America developed a measurement tool called the Advocacy Index to set a baseline and track the long-term progress of our network of food banks' capacity for advocacy, and in turn, Feeding America's capacity.

As part of our long-term advocacy capacity building strategy, we first developed an ideal advocacy model that consists of five core competencies: recruiting/mobilizing grassroots, recruiting/mobilizing grassroots, leveraging local media on policy issues, building partnerships/coalitions, and engaging elected officials directly. We wanted to develop the skills and behavior at our food banks so they were effectively executing across these five capacities on a regular, consistent basis.

Luckily, Feeding America has an annual survey that all network food banks are contractually obligated to complete. The government relations staff was able to add questions to the survey about how often each food bank was mobilizing grassroots, mobilizing grassroots, leveraging local media, meeting with partners, and engaging with elected officials and their staff within a 12 month period. We created a frequency range for each question. An example is below:

How many times has your Food Bank asked grassroots supporters (such as advocates, volunteers, agencies, etc.) to act on a policy issue (email or call elected officials, write a letter to the editor, etc.)?

Drop down: None; 1-5;
6-10; 11 or more



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For each range across the five advocacy functional areas (grassroots, grasstops, media, partnerships, direct engagement with elected officials), we assigned a numeric value (ex: 0 times = 0, 1-5 times = 1, 6-10 times = 2, 11 or more times = 3). We averaged those numbers across the five questions and created the Advocacy Index, a score of 0-3 that represents how often each food bank is engaging in the five advocacy competencies we identified.

Below you'll see a simple snapshot of the results from year 1.

Advocacy integrated into Food Banks	Number of Food Banks	% of Network
Advocacy a part of FB's mission, vision, or values	168	83%
Advocacy written into mission, vision, or values state ments	112	55%
Advocacy written into strategic plan	132	65%

Advocacy Activities	Number of Food Banks				Percent of Network			
	None	1-10 Times	11-20 Times	21 or more	None	1-10 Times	11-20 Times	21 or more
Number of Times engage with Federal Officials	23	105	44	30	11%	52%	22%	15%
Number of Times engage with State/Local Officials	6	92	42	62	3%	46%	21%	31%

Advocacy Activities	Number of Food Banks				Percent of Network			
	None	1-5 Times	6-10 Times	11 or more	None	1-5 Times	6-10 Times	11 or more
Number of Times Federal/State/Local legislators proactively reached out to FB	28	112	34	28	14%	55%	17%	14%
Number of Times Utilize d Local Media for Policy Issues	42	97	30	33	21%	48%	15%	16%
Number of Times FB asked Grassroots supporters to act	33	81	43	45	16%	40%	21%	22%
Number of Times FB asked "grasstop" allies to act	52	100	29	21	26%	50%	14%	10%
Number of Times met with non-traditional local orgs about policy issues	51	93	15	43	25%	46%	7%	21%

The Advocacy Index has allowed us to set a baseline, project growth over time, report results to senior staff and donors, set strategies to specifically build advocacy capacity at food banks in key congressional districts (we can easily identify where food banks are actively advocating or not based on an objective measure), and execute a long-term capacity building program for the entire network. It has also created a friendly competition across the network to boost their Advocacy Index scores in an attempt to best their peers—a significant boon to our efforts.

To date, we have two years worth of data. The results have been clear: by implementing the Advocacy Index and tracking results, it has made our food banks more actively engaged in our public policy work and has challenged them to think about advocacy more comprehensively—beyond simply meeting with elected officials. It has helped educate our food banks about what advocacy is, what food banks need to do to build organizational capacity for advocacy, and provided them with a goal. Without any additional investment in budget, we saw a modest increase in food banks at proficient to advanced level (Advocacy Index of 2.0 or higher) after the first year, with an increase of five food banks. However, we expected a natural dip as they became more aware of the Advocacy Index, what they were doing in terms of advocacy, and what they were not doing. In year 3, we have set a goal of moving 10 more food banks to the proficient and above category.

The chart below shows the first two years of data. Note: because the survey asks about the previous year, the data available is essentially 1 year old.



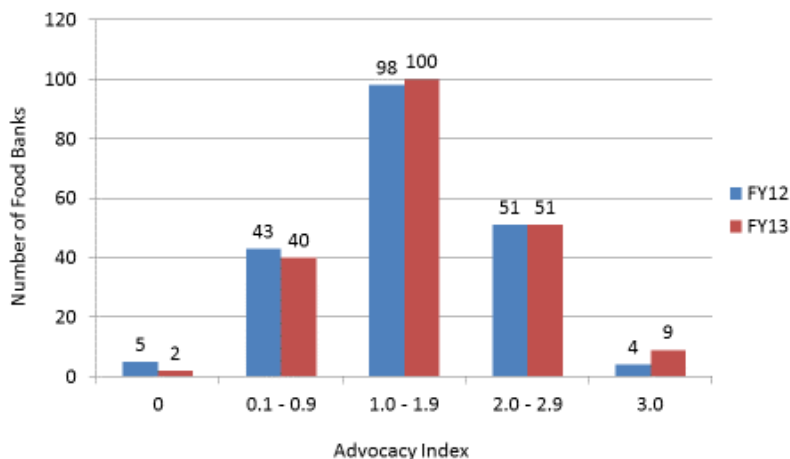
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FY12 – FY 13 Advocacy Index Comparison



To complement the Advocacy Index, we implemented the Advocacy Hall of Fame, which challenges food banks to complete tasks in the five advocacy competencies of our model. By completing all the tasks, a food bank will become a member of the Advocacy Hall of Fame, and because all the challenges are tied directly to the Advocacy Index, their score will naturally increase. In year 1 of the Advocacy Hall of Fame, we had 13 food banks. In year two, we have nearly matched that number and food banks still have 3 more months in the calendar year to complete the challenges.

By measuring the advocacy activity of our food banks, we are ultimately measuring the capacity of Feeding America as a national organization. Based on much of the prevailing research on advocacy evaluation, measuring capacity and our ability to engage in and adapt to the legislative process, is an effective and legitimate organizational outcome (see “The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Steven Teles & Mark Schmitt, Summer 2011). The Advocacy Index attempts to measure that ability and allows us to show progress over time.

What prompted this innovation?

Feeding America consists of a diverse network of 200 food banks. Each food bank is an independent 501C3 with their own strategic plans, leadership, and priorities. How food banks prioritize and value advocacy varies greatly from food bank to food bank. However, we know that our food banks are our most credible and effective advocates, well positioned to both engage their elected officials as well as mobilize their community. Knowing this, we developed a long-term advocacy capacity strategy that would build the core competencies of our food banks to engage in the legislative process and track our progress over time. We needed a baseline and a measurement system to show advancement towards our goal and incentivize behavior. The Advocacy Index was our solution.



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How is this innovation likely to change the way political involvement programs are conducted?

It's a simple solution to a complex problem. There is no perfect measurement system when it comes to measuring advocacy, but too few organizations are willing to try. Our Advocacy Index holds up to the latest research in the field and attempts to measure organizational capacity, as opposed to focusing solely on like meetings or phone calls. While one could argue that we are still measuring outputs, we can show that a specific percentage of our food banks are at an Advocacy Index of 2.0 (proficient) or higher (advanced), and are therefore measuring Feeding America's organizational capacity, a viable *outcome*.

It also allows us to show the impact of investments in advocacy and set long-term goals. If we are asked to provide a report to a donor or senior staff, we have data that points to our progress.

What can public affairs professionals learn from your innovation?

Being able to measure the one's advocacy program is critical if one hopes to secure organizational investment, particularly during congressional deadlock that limits policy wins. Whether working at a nonprofit and reporting to a board or funder, a trade association accountable to its members, or a corporation that needs to show a demonstrated return on investment, any public affairs professional will need to be able to measure success and progress towards a goal. The Advocacy Index provides such a tool and attempts to tackle one of the biggest challenges in our business—how to effectively measure an advocacy program.