

How to Start a Citizen Advocacy Group

The information in this section is from the [NCCNHR Toolkit for Advocates – Chapter 1](http://nccnhr.org/sites/default/files/advocate/whats-new/BasicElements.pdf), located at <http://nccnhr.org/sites/default/files/advocate/whats-new/BasicElements.pdf>

When organizing a citizen advocacy group (CAG), it is necessary to develop a mission statement. Whether your CAG is a formalized organization or an informal group of concerned citizens, it is helpful for the group to have a clear mission statement to ensure that the CAG is staying true to its values and purpose.

After developing the mission statement, it is important for CAGs to establish an organizational structure, or hierarchy, that addresses the following points:

- Executive leadership
- Membership/Membership dues
- External support
- Potential obstacles

CAGs must also decide whether or not to incorporate as a nonprofit organization. Although most donors and funders will not give money to organizations that are not incorporated as a nonprofit, incorporation is not necessary but is beneficial for the CAG's long-term sustainability and efficacy. While legitimizing the CAG to policy-makers, incorporation also requires additional responsibilities that CAG members must be prepared for. CAGs that do decide to incorporate should then apply for 501(c)(3) status from the IRS. It is important to note that CAGs that apply for nonprofit status should be aware of the lobbying restrictions of a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

After applying for incorporation, CAGs should establish an effective and diverse board of directors, and write the organization's bylaws. The bylaws are essentially the "constitution" of the organization, and will serve to govern the organization's day-to-day activities as well as provide a direction for the CAG's government in the future.

One of the biggest challenges for a newly-developed and incorporated CAG is to build a solid base of members and supporters. CAGs should utilize whatever strategies they can to market themselves, including the use of media, networking, hosting events, etc. CAGs should also hold fundraisers and reach out to donors for financial support while continuously developing a strong membership. A CAG's members provide significant support and should therefore be cultivated.

Remember, it is important to keep in mind the true purpose of a citizen advocacy group: to improve the quality of care for long-term care residents in their locality, state or region. When organizing a CAG, keep this intention aligned with your goals and purpose. We wish you success in your future advocacy endeavors!

Note: For help developing a mission statement, applying for tax-exempt status, organizing a board of directors, building a membership base, etc, see the resources available in Chapter 1: Basic Elements for Creating a Lasting Citizen Advocacy Group, on the NCCNHR website.