

Creating a Nonprofit Public Policy Screen – A Guide

Disclaimer: This document is not intended as legal advice. Your organizational goals, purpose, bylaws, and values should drive the creation of this document.

A key role for every organization (charitable 501(c)(3)s included) is to “stand for mission.” In many instances, though, it is hard to know when and how the organization’s voice can make an impact on a public policy issue, and even if that issue is the “right” one for the organization to stand on.

While clear prohibitions exist for all charitable 501(c)(3)s from endorsing or opposing political candidates and some limitations are in place for lobbying efforts, every organization can find appropriate ways to use its voice to advance its mission.

Using a screening device can help the team know where to use the organization’s voice. Additional tools can then be applied to understand how the organization can best exercise its voice.

Importantly, this is a tool that is developed by your organization, for your organization, and about your organization. In other words, no two screens are identical, and the act of creating the screen is just as important as using it effectively. It also means that the screen is about the organization’s mission, not the personalities or opinions of a single person.

Centering the screening device, and truly, all public policy work on mission results in more commitment to the work over the long term and insulates the organization from a single point of view. In addition to helping your organization decide when and how to engage, an effective screen can ensure your organization has a clear, powerful, and grounded voice on the topics you wish to pursue. It can also help avoid unnecessary distractions in an often very loud and crowded landscape.

A useful place to start is to provide context for board and staff leaders to understand the landscape where your mission operates both locally, nationally, and in some cases globally.

The following steps provide a framework for that process:

1. Identify the laws, regulations, and external policies and practices that affect your work. Make three lists: (1) those that are preventing you from advancing your mission, (2) those that could threaten your ability to advance your mission, and (3) those that, if put in place, would leverage your work to help you achieve your mission.
2. Write a paragraph about what life would be like for your organization/community if public policy were changed in your favor.
3. Identify the government officials who influence the laws and regulations that affect your work.

4. Identify the government officials, business leaders, community leaders, and opinion leaders who influence the laws and regulations that affect your work. Consider if a grassroots approach or a grass-tops approach is best suited to advance your issue(s).
5. Connect with other groups in your subsector or field of service to put you in contact with others who work on public policy issues of interest to your organization.

(Five steps adapted from the National Council of Nonprofits)

Creating the screening tool

Effective screening tools are incredibly simple to use, even as they grapple with complicated issues. The best screens allow the team to clearly say “yes” and “no” to issues as they arise and/or allow for healthy debate of an issue based on the screening device. Tip: If every issue passes the screen, then it is not specific enough.

Pick no more than 4-5 filters. Too many bog down the process, and too few do not filter the topics enough. There are a number of ways to describe your filters. Consider the following as categories:

1. The first filter is always mission, core values, and strategic goals.
2. The second filter focuses on stakeholder alignment. In other words, would those you serve, those who donate, or those who partner with you understand (though not necessarily agree) with why you would be a voice on the issue?
3. The third filter focuses on your organizational credibility to speak on the issue. This filter aligns mission but more than that it speaks to the trust, relationships, and credibility your organization has as an “expert” or “leader” on the subject matter. In turn, it also is an opportunity to engage other advocates and have them lead or take part as appropriate. Leading the way is not always the best path and the ability to “stay in one’s lane” is essential in this work – to do otherwise lessens your credibility overall.
4. The fourth filter is your organization’s capacity to take any of the recommended actions. It could be that your organization feels strongly about an issue but simply does not have the people, money, or internal resources to do it well. This can be a great moment to partner for impact or support another group to lead.
5. The fifth filter can be in recognition of your organization’s commitment to equity. An example of how Foraker summarizes these five filters can be found on our website.

Using the filter

1. Once your filter is complete and approved by the board, it can be used annually to pick priorities for the year and to determine possible action as issues arise. Some organizations have an organic approach to using the screening tool, while others write policies and procedures.

2. Formally or informally start by defining the issue as specifically as you can and in ways that feel understandable to the team.
3. Convene a team (often a board public policy committee or staff and board combination or full board and executive) to move the issue through the filter, one layer at a time. If the group gets stuck, determine if it is worth the work to move forward or if the answer is simply not to pursue the idea.
4. If the idea makes it through all the filters, follow your internal process for board approval.
5. Once approved, determine the appropriate action items, budget implications, and staff and board roles to carry out the decision.

Note that some policy screens take an extra set of steps earlier in the process to offer some form of rating system to prioritize issues and/or to articulate civic action.

Remember that it may take years to see progress or to complete many public policy goals.

Be ready to adapt your strategies or change course as new information evolves. Persistence and patience go hand-in-hand.

Regardless of your type of nonprofit, it is 100% acceptable – and encouraged – for you to speak boldly for your mission and the people, issues, and places it impacts.

For more information on using your mission voice, give us a call.