

GIVE, **ADVOCATE**, VOLUNTEER

Merriam Webster defines an advocate as *one that pleads the cause of another*, and advocacy as *the act or process of advocating or supporting a cause or purpose*.

Advocates for young children can be a potent voice for those who are seldom heard and a welcome ally to parents of young children and the provider community that assists them. Business champions, who can elevate a community’s conversation and can garner government attention to our early childhood priorities, have a powerful inducement to do so . . . their own economic interests are closely linked to getting the early childhood part of the equation right.

United Ways, through their board of directors and existing relationships with business leaders are well positioned to draw attention to the needs of young children . . . to use this conversation as the framework for social change . . . to engage their communities in a conversation and set of actions aimed not at addressing a particular event or crisis but at altering local conditions that lead to improvements in the overall well being of its youngest children.

Advocacy can also mean applying pressure on our elected officials to use their power and influence to support the needed changes in local conditions. But step one is always about identifying what those are and framing the solution. Public policy advocacy is a key strategy but not the only element of advocacy work.

Being an advocate for young children also means highlighting what works, how your community supports young children and their families and reframing the local conversation about young children to be more than about school readiness and supporting working parents. It is key to advancing the common good.

We offer the following twelve-month “advocacy agenda” as a means for you to engage your business leaders as advocates for young children both as public policy advocates and as champions for the common good.

January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governor’s State of the State message and budget for the upcoming fiscal year are released. Look for information from UWNYS about significant elements of each that may affect your community’s early childhood priorities. Pass it on – share the information with your Board, community partners and business leaders. • Ask your business leaders to communicate with the Governor (phone, mail, e-mail) about what they liked and didn’t like about the proposals. (UWNYS will draft and share responses for you to customize.)
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February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a plan in place and local champions identified to weigh in with members of the Legislature regarding the Executive Budget proposals. Include letters, phone calls and meetings as a part of the strategy. Ask them to be available to comment when the Governor and local Legislators convene budget hearings and meetings in your community. • During the Legislature’s winter recess, make plans to visit your state Legislators in their district offices. Bring a business champion with you to this meeting. Also consider inviting your Legislators to a UW Board meeting, to visit an early childhood facility or WIC site, to check out a Super Saturday event planned by your local CASH collaborative, or to stop in at a local program that you support. Better yet, do them all!
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to be on the look-out for legislative alerts from UWNYS. Double check your plan and your champions to be sure that you can respond quickly and as needed to budget negotiations and positions advanced by the Legislature that your United Way either disagrees with or supports. • Bring your business champions to United Way of New York State’s March 22 Board of Directors advocacy meeting. UWNYS will help you to orient your business champions, prepare early childhood materials and provide training and background on conducting successful legislative visits. • Convene your local agencies and school districts for a conversation with your county social services commissioner and/or the facilitated enroller for your area about getting children signed up for Child Health Plus, what more can be done and how you collectively can make this happen. HR directors for local businesses that may also employ lower wage workers may be good targets for this activity as well. • Arrange for a letter to the editor from your business champions on issue affecting young children – a good lead into the Month of the Young Child.
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • April is both Child Abuse Prevention Month and the Month of the Young Child – work with your local child care provider community to bring community leaders into early childhood facilities as readers – connect with your media partners for a story on the readers and the importance of early literacy. Line up business leaders for this activity. • Submit a guest editorial about provisions in the recently approved state budget that matter to your community. Highlight those that relate to efforts in your community that demonstrate results, i.e., home visitation and its success in preventing child abuse, improving health, etc. (Look for draft materials from UWNYS.) • Recognize National Volunteer Week – work with your agencies and other community partners to highlight the significant volunteer contingent in your community working to advance the common good. As one example of volunteerism in action, ask a business leader to spend an hour in a child care or Head Start facility reading a story to the children or conducting some other activity.
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share your EITC/VITA success – issue a press release that describes the dollar impact of your efforts and some of what you’ve learned that EITC claimants will do with their refunds. • Use the above EITC results as the forum for highlighting child poverty in your community. Ask business champions to speak to other civic organizations about the status of young children in your community, the value of early childhood investments and the immediate as well as potential future economic impact of those investments. (UWNYS has a PowerPoint presentation that can be adapted for this purpose. Let us know and we’ll pass it on.)

June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With a business partner, install a Born Learning trail in your community during United Way's Day of Action. Send a photo and media release to local media outlets as well as the in-house newsletter of that business. Need help crafting remarks? Contact UWNYS. • Be on the look-out for alerts from UWNYS regarding bills that are likely to be acted on by the Legislature before they recess for the summer. Double check your plan and your champions so that you/they are prepared to weigh in with letters and phone calls as instructed by the alert. • Congratulate the Class of 2010 – those graduating from pre-school. Engage business leaders as graduation speakers for these events. Send a photo and media release to local media outlets as well as the in-house newsletter of that business.
July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help to publicize the availability and location of summer feeding programs for children. • Publicly thank members of the Legislature who have supported issues that matter in your community. Use business champions to help deliver the message.
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight local literacy efforts that support children's readiness for the upcoming school year. Arrange for a media visit to a related program. Ask a business leader to be available to discuss the importance of early literacy and their interests in this work. • With key business partners, organize a school supply drive so that all children are well-provisioned for the upcoming school year.
September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Back to school – schedule an editorial board meeting with education leaders that addresses ingredients for a successful academic year. Include business champions in order to highlight early education and the longer term economic benefits. • Be prepared to respond to possible reductions in state funding for programs and priorities important to your community – letters to the Governor and Legislature, meetings with elected officials, media response, etc. • Be on the look-out for alerts from UWNYS and be sure your plan and champions are in place for addressing this.
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update your local needs assessment/report card. Issue a report to the community of work that is being done to advance the common good. Ask a business leader for a public statement for the release of your report; focus those remarks on the early childhood priorities that have been identified. • Schedule meetings with your state Legislators to let them know what issues are most important to you and your partners. Be sure to have a business partner with you to support the case for investments in young children. Write a letter to the Governor with the same information – get your Board and business leaders to do the same. • Ask business leaders to participate in early literacy events – read to a group of young children, address providers and parents, etc. – take advantage of the photo op – get a photo in the local paper, invite a film crew from a local television station to film the event and interview your business leader about the importance of early literacy.

November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement a Business/Government Leader issues event to identify health and human services priorities in your community that also affect the business bottom line. • Engage schools/pre-schools, agencies (including the early childhood provider community) and businesses in a public campaign to support youth fitness and obesity prevention to back up the NFL/United Way Youth Fitness PSA Campaign. • Issue a challenge to service organizations, key clubs, fraternities and sororities, etc. to be sure that families in your community are not forgotten during the holiday season. Encourage food, clothing, toy drives and back them up with an editorial or letter to the editor written by a local business leader about what the holiday season holds for our most vulnerable populations.
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask your business leaders to send a pre-budget release op ed or letter to the editor of the local paper urging the Governor to keep the needs of young children in the forefront as he finalizes the budget for the next fiscal year. Watch for a sample from UWNYS that can be adapted for your community's particular needs and priorities. • Cold sets in again – be sure your community knows about local services for those residents who are having trouble affording food, home heating and other basic needs. The impact on a community's most vulnerable populations, including young children can be dire. Promote the use of 2-1-1 for easy access to that information. • It's not too early to begin promoting the EITC and other tax credits (i.e.; child and dependent care credits) and local VITA sites. Work with community and media partners to get the word out. • From your business champions, ask the local paper to publish an open letter to the community that addresses our/their hope for young children in the New Year.

The above are intended as examples of ways that local United Ways and their business leaders can advocate for young children and along the way advance the common good in their communities. It is by no means an exhaustive list and is provided to start the conversation.

Give us your ideas – activities you engaged in this year or plan to add to your calendar. We will continue to update this list with additional ideas. Send them to Susan Hager (hagers@uwnys.org) or Mary Shaheen (shaheenm@uwnys.org).