



Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Webinars and Lesson Plans

The following educational resource materials were designed by the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center at the Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. to teach middle and high school students about legislative advocacy at the state level. These 3 webinars and 7 lesson plans were designed to prepare students who plan to attend Mental Health Matters Day in Albany this March. However, if your school is unable to attend this year, the webinars and lessons will still be accessible for Health, Government and US History classes, as well as clubs. Please feel free to share these webinars and lesson plans with other educators.

Lesson plans can be modified to different grade levels, with some being more difficult and time-consuming than others. It is highly recommended that educators use the lesson plans in the order presented below as they were developed to correspond with the content of the webinars.

Each webinar is 15-20 minutes in length and is taught by MHANYS' Director of Public Policy John Richter. The webinars are designed to teach students about the basics of public policy and legislative advocacy. The topics of the three webinars include:

- **Public Policy and Legislative Advocacy Part I** Introduces students to the concept of public policy and how governments establish them to solve certain problems in society.
- **Public Policy and Legislative Advocacy Part II** Discusses how advocates play a role in shaping public policy.
- **Public Policy and Legislative Advocacy Part III** Describes steps you can take to become an advocate and influence the decision-making process in the state Legislature. It also talks about how to schedule and prepare for a meeting with your legislator, how to conduct the meeting and how to follow up afterwards.

It is highly recommended that educators preview the webinars and use these lesson plans in the following order:

- Lessons 1, 2 and 3 before Webinar I
- Lessons 4 and 5 before Webinar II
- Lesson 6 after Webinar II
- Lessons 7 after Webinar III

Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Lesson Plans

It is recommended that teachers complete Lessons #1, #2 and #3 with students before watching Webinar I.

Lesson #1 Key Terms: Legislative 101 Matching

Objective:

Inform students about common terms used in advocacy in preparation for future lessons about the state legislative process.

Activities/Discussion:

- In preparation for a unit on legislative advocacy, there are certain vocabulary terms that students should be familiar with to understand future lessons and the webinars.

- Students should make their best effort to match the 14 concepts with the correct definition. It is recommended that they use pencil so they can fix any mistakes. It may be helpful for them to work in teams. Review the answers in class and provide examples where necessary.

Handouts:

Key Terms: Legislative 101 Matching Worksheet and Answer Key

Lesson #2 Public Policy: When Should the Government Get Involved and at What Level?

Objective:

Help students distinguish between public issues that may require government attention from private issues of concern and brainstorm important public issues that need government attention. The second part of this lesson instructs students about the different responsibilities of the three levels of government.

Activities/Discussion:

- Remind students about the meaning of the term ‘public policy.’ Emphasize that sometimes the government chooses to pass a law or make a regulation on a public policy matter, but that sometimes they choose not to act at all.

- Review the difference between public problems that require government action versus private problems that have to be addressed by individuals, families, business owners or the free market.

- Have a student read the paragraph below the definition of ‘public policy’ and discuss the examples given. Explain that sometimes what starts out as a private concern becomes a public issue if there is a negative effect on a large number of people.

- Students should then complete the two questions on side 1 of the worksheet. Follow up with feedback from students to assess if they understand the difference between public and private issues and to have a broader discussion about some major public policy issues.
- Explain that in addition to knowing if something is a public issue citizens need to know which level of government handles different issues so they can go to the right person with their concerns.
- Ask students if they know what the three levels of government are (National, State, Local) Briefly describe the 3 levels of government and have a student read the top of side 2 of the worksheet.
- Either have the students complete the exercise and then go over it or discuss one topic at a time, having students explain their answers.

Handouts:

Public Policy: When Should the Government Get Involved and at What Level? Worksheet and Answer Key

Lesson #3 Identifying National, State and Local Elected Officials

Objective:

Search online to find out who your individual elected officials are at the national, state and local level

Activities/Discussion:

-Students will use Internet sources to search for the names of their elected officials. This can be completed as a homework assignment or in school. Explain that it is helpful to know who your government leaders are so you can contact them about a public issue.

- Review the answers in class.

Handouts:

Identifying National, State and Local Elected Officials Worksheet and Answer Key

Online Resources:

Internet sites: www.usa.gov/elected-officials, www.nysenate.gov/find-my-senator and/or nyassembly.gov/mem/search/

It is recommended that teachers complete Lessons #4, and #5 with students before watching Webinar II.

Lesson #4 The Leaky Bucket

Objective:

To create a visual for students to show them how to understand the difference between a public policy problem, root causes of the problem and potential solutions.

Activities/Discussion:

- Set up all the materials on a 5-6-foot table before class for a demonstration. Put towels across the table (to catch excess water spilled) with a big bowl of water on one end and a large measuring cup on the other end. Use scissors to poke one hole on the bottom of one cup, two holes in the second and three holes in another. Try to make all the holes of equal size and big enough so not much water will stay in the cup. The fourth cup should have no holes on the bottom. Make sure your stop watch is ready.

- When the students arrive tell them you are doing a fun demonstration to teach them about how to solve problems. Tell them the activity is a way for them to think about how people work together to develop solutions to problems. Explain to them that the problem is that your garden is too dry and the plants are dying. Try to get them to use their imagination for this demo by thinking of the paper cups as a bucket and the measuring cup as a backyard garden. If you have a few flowers you can put them in the measuring cup.

- Tell them the goal of the demo is to put as much water in the measuring cup in 20 seconds as possible using a paper cup. The closer to the top the water goes, the closer you are to solving the problem.

- Select one student to run the stopwatch and another to keep track of how much water is in the measuring cup after each run on the board. You will do 4 trial runs – 1 with a cup with 3 holes, then 2 holes, then 1 and then with no holes. Do not tell the students about the holes in the cups.

- Choose one student who will walk back and forth, not run, from one end of the table, scoop water from the bowl and place it in the measuring cup for 20 seconds. Tell them to hold the cup over the table as they walk in case it spills.

- Do not tell them beforehand that there are three holes on the bottom of the cup for the first run. Get your stop watch ready and set to 20 seconds. At the end of the time record on a board how much water the student got in the measuring cup.

- Debrief after the initial run and ask students what happened. Did the garden get fully watered? Why or Why not? Ask - If the dry garden is the problem what is the root cause of the problem?

(They should tell you it's because there is not enough water reaching the garden and the hose is leaking/broken). Do they have any solutions? (fix the leaks, buy a new hose, pray for rain)

- Try the exercise again with another student using two holes in the bottom and again with the cup with one hole. Record the results for each run and your results should improve each time. Finally, try it with a cup with no holes in the bottom and it should fill up close to the top.

- After the exercise, refer to the Leaky Bucket Teacher Reference Guide to connect the demonstration to the problems faced by elected officials in solving public policy problems.

Materials:

The Leaky Bucket Teacher Reference Guide

4 paper cups

Scissors

Bowl filled with water (you may need reserves)

Measuring cup (label garden)

Towels

5-6-foot table

Stopwatch

Lesson #5 How to Research State Legislation

Objective:

To teach students how to do online research to look at proposed state legislation on a specific public policy topic. This research might help them choose an issue they want to write about for another legislative advocacy lesson.

Activities/Discussion:

- Tell students that before they can propose any solutions to existing public policy issues they need to research previous legislation to see what has passed or is being considered by the state Legislature or US Congress.

- Explain that the Internet now allows citizens the opportunity to look up bills that are being considered by the state Legislature so they can find out about the content of the bills. Remember, any bill must be signed by both the assembly and senate and signed by the governor to become a law.

- Brainstorm on the worksheet 2 different topics you may be interested in researching. They can be broad like mental health, the environment or transportation or narrow like dogs, candy or sleep.

- If they have chosen broad topics try to narrow them down to a more specific search. For example, instead of health care, try nursing or nursing homes. For mental health, try treatment or suicide prevention.

- Either as a homework assignment or on computers in class, have students complete the worksheet. Discuss what they discovered in their research.

Handouts:

How to Research State Legislation Worksheet

Online Resources:

public/leginfo.state.ny.us/navigate.cgi

It is recommended that teachers begin Lessons #6 with students before watching Webinar III. The assignment can be completed after Mental Health Matters Day.

Lesson #6 Writing an Issue Brief

Objective:

Teach students the research, critical thinking and writing skills necessary to write an “issue brief” to support a legislative proposal on a particular issue.

Activities:

- Explain the purpose of an issue brief to students (Expectations can be modified to grade level)

- Describe the different stages of the process in putting the issue brief together as described on the worksheet

- Review the Mental Health in Education Issue Brief created by MHANYS in 2016 and describe the state law that requires schools to teach about mental health K-12 that went into effect in New York State this fall.

- Have students choose a topic they are interested in researching. Remember, they can choose one they researched for Lesson #5.

- Conduct online or book research about the topic to learn more about the public policy problem, the causes of the problem and possible solutions. This can be done during class or for homework.

- Write an issue brief and share what they learned with other students in class. You may choose to have students peer edit their issue briefs.

- If time permits, the students could role play as state legislators and present their bill to the class as if they are in the legislature. They could argue in favor of their bill and have the class vote on each piece of legislation.

Handouts:

How to Write an Issue Brief Handout
MHANYS Mental Health in Education Issue Brief

Online Resources:

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/policy-briefs/>

http://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa_policy_briefs_essential_guide.pdf

It is recommended that teachers complete Lessons #7 with students after watching Webinar III and attending Mental Health Matters Day.

Lesson #7 Writing Thank You Letter(s) to Your Legislator

Objective:

Teach students the proper etiquette about expressing thanks to legislators they meet with at Mental Health Matters Day or if they meet with a legislator or other elected official in their district or receive a visit from a local elected official at their school.

Activities/Discussion:

- Discuss the importance of thanking legislators or any other elected official they meet with in their office or at school. Then review the topics discussed at your meeting with the legislator and write them on the board so students can refer to them when writing their note.
- Have students refer to the worksheet to get ideas about wording their letter. Explain that it does not have to be the same as the template word-for-word.
- Either as one group or individually, have students work on a letter that will be sent to the legislator and make sure it is mailed.

Handouts:

Writing Thank You Letter to a Legislator handout

Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Lesson #1

Name _____

Date _____

Key Terms: Legislative 101 Matching

Match each term with its definition. Write the correct letter in the space provided.

A. Public Policy	H. Advocate
B. Legislation	I. Advocacy
C. Elected Official	J. Lobbyist
D. Legislator	K. Special Interest Group
E. New York State Legislature	L. Politics
F. Constituent	M. Political Environment
G. Constituency	N. Public Policy Issue Brief

1. _____ a body of citizens represented by an elected official, especially those entitled to elect a representative.
2. _____ a person who is a government official because they are elected by the people. These may include school board members, local leaders and state and federal legislators.
3. _____ the process of making government decisions that apply to members of a group. This word comes from the Greek and means “affairs of the cities.”
4. _____ what government does or does not do about a problem that comes before them for consideration and possible action.
5. _____ a person who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy.
6. _____ the preparation and enactment of laws by a legislative body through its lawmaking process.
7. _____ the government and its institutions interacting with the public and private people and organizations to influence the system.
8. _____ any action that speaks in favor of, recommends, argues for a cause, supports or defends, or pleads on behalf of others.

9. _____ a person who is represented politically by a designated government official or officeholder, especially, but not exclusively, a citizen entitled to elect a representative. Even though you may not be old enough to vote today, some day you will be a voter and elected officials care about you too.
10. _____ an elected official who makes laws and is a member of a legislative body.
11. _____ an organization of people who share a common interest and work together to protect and promote that interest by influencing the government.
12. _____ a person who tries to influence legislation on behalf of a special interest or cause. These people are regulated by the government and must be registered.
13. _____ consists of the two houses. In our state, these include the senate and assembly. New York has 63 Senators and 150 assembly members.
14. _____ a concise, written summary of a particular issue, that explains policy options and proposed recommendations on the best solution to a problem to inform government policymakers and others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy.

Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Lesson #1

ANSWER KEY

Key Terms: Legislative 101 Matching

Match each term with its definition. Write the correct letter in the space provided.

A. Public Policy	H. Advocate
B. Legislation	I. Advocacy
C. Elected Official	J. Lobbyist
D. Legislator	K. Special Interest Group
E. New York State Legislature	L. Politics
F. Constituent	M. Political Environment
G. Constituency	N. Public Policy Issue Brief

1. G a body of citizens represented by an elected official, especially those entitled to elect a representative.
2. C a person who is a government official because they are elected by the people. These may include school board members, local leaders and state and federal legislators.
3. L the process of making government decisions that apply to members of a group. This word comes from the Greek and means “affairs of the cities.”
4. A what government does or does not do about a problem that comes before them for consideration and possible action.
5. H a person who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy.
6. B the preparation and enactment of laws by a legislative body through its lawmaking process.
7. M the government and its institutions interacting with the public and private people and organizations to influence the system.
8. I any action that speaks in favor of, recommends, argues for a cause, supports or defends, or pleads on behalf of others.

9. **F** a person who is represented politically by a designated government official or officeholder, especially, but not exclusively, a citizen entitled to elect a representative. Even though you may not be old enough to vote today, some day you will be a voter and elected officials care about you too.
10. **D** an elected official who makes laws and is a member of a legislative body.
11. **K** an organization of people who share a common interest and work together to protect and promote that interest by influencing the government.
12. **J** a person who tries to influence legislation on behalf of a special interest or cause. These people are regulated by the government and must be registered.
13. **E** consists of the two houses. In our state, these include the Senate and Assembly. New York has 63 Senators and 150 Assembly members.
14. **N** a concise, written summary of a particular issue, that explains policy options and proposed recommendations on the best solution to a problem to inform government policymakers and others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy.

Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Lesson #2

Name _____

Date _____

Public Policy: When Should the Government Get Involved and at What Level?

The definition of **public policy** is *‘what government does or does not do about a problem that comes before them for consideration and possible action.’*

Not all problems can be taken care of through government action. For example, if you do not have a pizza place in your neighborhood that is not a problem for the government. Likewise, if you have trouble finding a summer job, this would be considered a personal issue, not a public one. On the other hand, if a great number of adults lost their job in a short period of time, this would eventually become a public policy issue because of its impact on the entire economy. Similarly, if you have a virus and get very sick this is not a government concern. However, if a large number of people become sick and it becomes an epidemic, the government may address this problem with a public health policy.

1. What types of problems do you think government officials might consider need their attention? List 3 below.

2. In your opinion, what one problem would you like the government to address right now? Why?

As a citizen, it is important to know what level of government makes policies on different issues so you know who to contact if you have a concern. There are 3 levels of government – National, State and Local – and each is responsible for different issues. There are, however, issues that are addressed at 2 or all 3 levels.

For the topics below choose whether it is the **National**, **State** or **Local** government that is responsible for taking charge on that issue and write it in the space provided. For those that require more than one level of government action indicate that in the space provided.

1. Build an interstate highway (like I-90)
2. Education standards
3. Tax citizens
4. Make repairs to a county bridge
5. Pass laws and regulations
6. Choose machines to use in elections
7. Fund the Navy
8. Get a marriage license
9. Make coins and dollar bills
10. Apply for a professional license to become a dentist
11. Set up a court of law
12. Provide Medicare health coverage for people over 65
13. Administer Medicaid to provide health care coverage for the poor
14. Declare war against another country

**Mental Health Matters Day
Legislative Advocacy Lesson #2**

ANSWER KEY

***Public Policy: When Should the Government
Get Involved and at What level?***

The definition of **public policy** is ‘*what government does or does not do about a problem that comes before them for consideration and possible action.*’

Not all problems can be taken care of through government action. For example, if you have no pizza place in your neighborhood that is not a problem for the government. Likewise, if you have trouble finding a summer job this would be considered a personal issue, not a public one. On the other hand, if a great number of adults lost their job in a short period of time, this would eventually become a public policy issue because of its impact on the entire economy. Similarly, if you have a virus and get very sick this is not a government concern. However, if a large number of people become sick, the government may feel the need to put a public health policy in place.

- 1. What types of problems do you think government officials might consider need their attention? List 3 below.**

Have Students brainstorm and discuss their answers in class.

Possibilities might include problems in areas like physical and mental health, the environment, foreign policy, the military, immigration, agriculture, housing, poverty, education, infrastructure repair, gun control

- 2. In your opinion, what one problem would you like the government to address right now? Why?**

Answers will vary. Have students explain their answers and see if there is some commonality in their responses. What topics come up most?

As a citizen, it is important to know what level of government makes policies on different issues so you know who to contact if you have a concern. There are 3 levels of government – National(Federal), State and Local – and each is responsible for different issues. There are, however, issues that are addressed at 2 or all 3 levels.

For the topics below choose whether it is the **National, State** or **Local** government that is responsible for taking charge on that issue and write it in the space provided. For those that apply to more than one level of government, indicate that in the space provided.

Explain that they would not go to a local or state leader with concerns about an issue that is decided by the national government like Medicare. Likewise, they should not reach out to the national government about local issues. The reason there is a division of responsibilities is because our Founding Fathers did not want too much power vested in any one level of government.

1. Build an interstate highway (like I-90) **National**
2. Education standards **State**
3. Tax citizens **National, State, Local**
4. Make repairs to a county bridge **Local**
5. Pass laws and regulations **National, State, Local**
6. Choose machines to use in elections **State**
7. Fund the Navy **National**
8. Get a marriage license **State**
9. Make coins and dollar bills **National**
10. Apply for a professional license to become a dentist **State**
11. Set up a court of law National, State **Local**
12. Provide Medicare health coverage for people over 65 **National**
13. Provide Medicaid health care coverage for the poor **National, State, Local**
14. Declare war against another country **National**

Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Lesson # 3

Name _____

Date _____

Identifying National, State and Local Elected Officials

Directions: Fill in the blanks of the National, State and Local government officials listed below. Use www.usa.gov/elected-officials, www.nysenate.gov/find-my-senator and/or nyassembly.gov/mem/search/ to research and identify your elected officials.

National Government

President

Vice President

Speaker of the House

Senate Majority Leader

Congressional Representative

U.S. Senators (2)

State Government

Governor

NYS State Senator

NYS Assembly Member

Local Government

County Executive

Mayor/Supervisor

**Mental Health Matters Day
Legislative Advocacy Lesson Plan #3**

ANSWER KEY

Identifying National, State and Local Elected Officials

Directions: Fill in the blanks of the National, State and Local government officials listed below. Use www.usa.gov/elected-officials, www.nysenate.gov/find-my-senator and/or nyassembly.gov/mem/search/ to research and identify your elected officials.

National Government

President

Donald J. Trump

Vice President

Mike Pence

Speaker of the House

Representative Nancy Pelosi

Congressional Representative

Answer will depend on your
Congressional District

Senate Majority Leader

Senator Mitchell (Mitch) McConnell

U.S. Senators (2)

Charles(Chuck) Schumer

Kirsten Gillibrand

State Government

Governor

Andrew M. Cuomo

NYS State Senator

Answer will vary by district

NYS Assembly Member

Answer will vary by district

Local Government

County Executive

Answer will vary by county

Mayor/Supervisor

Answer will vary by community

Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Lesson # 4

The Leaky Bucket Teacher Reference Guide

After completing the Leaky Bucket exercise it is recommended that educators lead their students in a discussion that connects the Leaky Bucket scenario to real life issues that need to be solved by government officials. The board can be used to keep track of the problems and solutions discussed in this lesson.

Educators can tell students that when legislators develop public policies for New York State they have to think long and hard about what the problem is, what is causing the problem and potential solutions. It is very common for there to be more than one root cause of a problem as well as a variety of solutions. The leaky bucket scenario can help us understand what legislators have to consider when making public policy. Here are some questions for discussion:

1. What did we decide the problem was in our demonstration?
a garden that was too dry causing the plants to die.
2. In our case, there were three leaks in our bucket. What might cause that?
The bucket is old, etc.
3. What are some solutions to our problems?
fix the leaks with tape or bandaids, buy a new bucket, get a hose, use in-ground sprinkler
4. What happened when there were only 2 holes or 1 hole in the bucket, compared to 3?
Less water spilled out. It was less of a problem (make sure they understand that there is often more than one problem and we need to keep looking for solutions because it's not an easy fix)

Consider a real example in the area of mental health policy. Tell students that one major problem is that many people with mental health challenges do not seek the necessary help. Ask the following questions:

1. If someone thinks they broke their leg in a fall what would they most likely do?
Go to hospital/doctor
2. Would they go right away or wait a few days, weeks?
They would go right away
3. If someone was depressed for a few months, what would they most likely do?
Go to doctor, psychiatrist, counselor
4. Would they go right away or wait for a long time? How long would they wait?
Possible answers: some might say go right away, after a few months, etc
5. How long do you think it take the average person to seek professional help for a mental health disorder?

Expect a range of answers

The answer is actually 10 years on average. This number may surprise students.

Tell students that even if someone waits a while to get help that recovery is still possible.

6. Ask them if they know when the average age of onset (or the beginning) is for mental disorders?

Expect a range of answers

The answer is 14 years of age which means many young people are not getting help until they are in their mid-20s. Again, this does not mean that they can't get help after waiting this long. However, if they sought help earlier it would make the recovery process easier.

7. Why do you think people wait much longer to get help for mental health challenges than physical illnesses?

Expect a range of answers.

Explain there are many reasons just like there were many leaks in the bucket. Solving a problem is complicated because there may often be several causes of the problem. Make sure students consider the following three reasons(just like the leaks)

- ***Many people are unaware that they have a mental health challenge because they are not educated about the signs and symptoms and don't realize they need help.***
- ***There is a lot of stigma about mental health disorders and people often treat those with mental health challenges with fear and without any empathy.***
- ***There are not enough services to help people even when people are willing to seek treatment, especially in rural areas.***

Tell students the Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc., which is sponsoring Mental Health Matters Day, is always working on solutions to help more people get help. Most recently, the Governor and state Legislature passed a law that went into effect in the fall of 2018 that requires all schools to teach students in grades K-12 about mental health. The goal is to educate young people so they seek the help they need and to promote awareness to reduce stigma. MHANYS established a School Mental Health Resource and Training Center, with funding from the state, to educate teachers and school administrators about the new law and to provide resources like this one.

In Lesson #6 we will discuss this new law more.

Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Lesson # 5

Name _____

Date _____

How to Research State Legislation

1. Choose two different topics you may be interested in researching to see if there is legislation on that topic. Write them below. If they are broad like the environment and health care, you may want to narrow your search with specific words like nursing for health care or suicide prevention for mental health. You may want to pick one serious topic and then pick a fun topic like candy or dogs or sleep.
2. Go to the following site. public/leginfo.state.ny.us/navigate.cgi
This website gives you information about every bill that was proposed and/or passed over the past several years.

New York State Legislature

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the New York State Legislature website. The navigation bar is dark teal with white text for 'Home', 'Agenda', 'Calendar', 'Lists', 'Laws', and 'Budget'. Below the navigation bar is a search area with a 'Bill No.' dropdown menu, a search input field, a '2019' year selector, and a 'Search' button. To the right of the search area are four checkboxes: 'Status' (checked), 'Text', 'Summary', and 'Sponsor's Memo'.

3. In the dropdown menu on the left where it says Bill No. scroll down to word search.
4. In the next space put in the word or words you want to search for your first topic (i.e. Mental Health and suicide prevention)
5. Look to see if there are proposals or bills passed so far this year. There may not be many so you can scroll down to 2018 to see if there are more bills.
6. The blue boxes on the right allow you to look at different areas. For example, the status is where the bill is now (i.e. passed, in committee). The text is the full bill and the summary gives a short description of the bill. Finally, the Sponsor's Memo explains why the Sponsor of the bill wants it to be passed.

After getting used to the site choose two searches that you are interested in and find a bill of interest. Fill out the information below.

Topic and Bill No. _____

Sponsor _____

Status of the bill _____

Summary of the Bill

Topic and Bill No. _____

Sponsor _____

Status of the bill _____

Summary of the Bill

Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Lesson # 6

Writing an Issue Brief

Once a legislative advocate has identified a public policy problem and finished their research it is time to put their thoughts in writing in the form of an issue brief. The brief will include information about an important public policy problem which is backed up with evidence and then make a recommendation for legislative action that offers a solution to this problem.

Policy briefs often include these sections:

- **Title:** A good title quickly communicates the contents of the brief.
- **Executive Summary:** A one paragraph overview of the problem and the proposed policy action. Briefly tell the legislators what you want; often referred to as “The Ask”.
- **Context or Scope of Problem:** This section communicates the importance of the problem and aims to convince the reader of the necessity of policy action by using evidence like statistics.
- **Policy Recommendations:** A detailed explanation of the legislation needed to address the problem and what benefits it will bring.

In 2016, the state Legislature passed the Mental Health Education in Schools Law to require all public and private schools to teach about mental health in schools from K-12. The law went into effect in the fall of 2018. The Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. was instrumental in getting this law passed. One tool that MHANYS used to advocate for this law was a well-worded issue brief. This brief includes the four sections described above and can give you an idea of what to include in an issue brief. Read through the issue brief carefully and use it as a model when writing your brief. Also, the two sites on the bottom of this page include tips and sample issue briefs to give you guidance.

Choose a topic for your issue brief that you are interested in researching and writing about. You may want to choose something you researched in Lesson #5

Remember, the information you compile for an issue brief can also be used to write legislators individual letters, or write letters to the editor to a local newspaper. The writing style will change, but the substance will be the same.

The following resources provide information about writing an issue brief and samples

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/policy-briefs/>

http://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa_policy_briefs_essential_guide.pdf

Mental Health Education in Schools

Mental health is critical to overall physical health and healthy living, and should be included as an integral part of health education in schools. Our public education system in New York has long recognized the value of health education. In more recent times we have updated this statutory imperative to include education in alcohol, drugs, tobacco abuse and the prevention and detection of certain cancers. The time has come to include mental health education as well.

Legislative Issue Brief – 2016

Mental health issues impact each of us daily either personally or through the experiences of family members, loved ones, or friends. One in five adults and children have a mental health diagnosis. In New York, over 300,000 of our youth are living with a serious mental health condition that significantly impairs their daily functioning. Still our education laws show little if any recognition of the need to teach our youth about this critical aspect of overall health.

Failing to talk about mental health or to provide basic public mental health instruction has consequences. Over 60% of young adults with a mental illness were unable to complete high school. Young people aged 16 to 24 with mental illness are 4 times less likely to be involved in gainful activities like employment, college or trade school, and are three times more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system. It is therefore critical to begin teaching young people about mental health early in life since about half of all chronic mental health conditions begin by age 14, half of all lifetime cases of anxiety disorders begin at age 11, and 22% of youth aged 13-18 experience a serious mental disorders in a given year.

Lack of knowledge coupled with stigma deters many people from taking full advantage of today's treatment options in a timely manner. In fact, almost 2 out of every 3 adults that need mental health services do not receive them and 50% of those that do delay getting treatment for an average of 10 years. This is very serious and disturbing since untreated mental illness tends only to become more severe over time and, in extreme cases, too often ends in suicide completion or self-injury. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 1 in 12 high school students have attempted suicide. Over 90% of youth who die by suicide completion were suffering from depression or another diagnosable and treatable mental illness at the time of their death. We do young people a disservice by remaining silent about mental health conditions like depression, eating disorders, and PTSD.

Unfortunately, there is little teaching or discussion of mental health in most public school health classes in New York. We believe that New York lawmakers hold the key that is needed for this to change. Without legislative intervention and a clear policy direction from lawmakers on this issue, there is little hope of breaking the silence. This is because the subject of mental illness is still an uncomfortable subject to discuss for many in our society. Teachers can be equally uncomfortable or uncertain as to the boundaries around what they can and cannot teach. This leads to a “when in doubt leave it out” mentality and causes confusion about the schools proper role in teaching such subjects. MHANYS supports amendments to the law that will help clarify the schools role and will free teachers to instruct on the subject with the full imprimatur of the State.

MHANYS seeks legislation that would allow maximum flexibility in the way each school or school district addresses the change in the statute. Our objective is to clarify that mental health is as integral to one’s overall well-being as is physical health, and as such, should be reflected in the law guiding health instruction.

By ensuring that young people are educated about mental health, we increase the likelihood that they will be able to more effectively recognize signs in themselves and others, including family members, and get the right help. Further, as we begin to teach the facts about mental health and openly discuss the issues from a health perspective, we will begin to lessen the stigma surrounding mental illnesses. Young people and their families would feel more comfortable seeking help, academic performance for all students would be enhanced, and ultimately lives can be saved. As New York works to restructure and integrate systems of health and mental health care, shouldn’t we also be preparing our citizens of tomorrow to think differently about the role that mental health plays in their lives?

Mental health, as we understand it in 2016, is an integral part of our overall health and can no longer be ignored in New York’s public education law. If we ignore it, then we fail to adequately prepare consumers of the future to be informed and active participants in the very systems we are building today. We possess the knowledge and tools necessary to increase awareness in young people about mental health, how to recognize signs and symptoms in themselves and others and how to get help. Why in the world would we withhold this lifesaving information from our youth?

Mental Health Matters Day Legislative Advocacy Lesson # 7

Writing Thank You Letter(s) to Your Legislator

Following a meeting with your Legislator, it is encouraged to send a thank you letter to the Senator or Assembly member. This is an important step in creating a positive and good, working relationship, and expresses that you valued their time. Additionally, letters can be personalizing with issues that are important to you and with specific facts about your local situation so the Legislator can revisit the issue(s) discussed. Letters are also a good opportunity to remind your Legislator of any commitments he or she may have made during your visit.

You or your group can use the sample letter below as a guide while writing your own thank you letter. Please note that the pronouns will need to be altered depending on if the letters will be written individually or as a group.

Date

[Name of Staffer, if applicable]
The Honorable [first name, last name]
NYS Senate Assembly
[Address for Senator/Assembly member]

Dear Senator (or Assembly member) [_____ last name _____],

I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to meet with you. I know your time is extremely valuable and I appreciate the time you took from your day to meet with my class from _____ while we were in the Capital for Mental Health Matters Day.

[Provide talking points on the key issue(s) you had discussed. You may utilize the issue briefs provided in your packets for reference if you spoke to these issue(s). Additionally, provide any follow-ups to any information you may have promised to provide to the Legislator and commitments the Legislator stated to the group].

(Conclude the with a final thank you)

Example conclusion: Again, thank you for taking the time to meet with me. If you require any additional information that I can provide/assist with, please contact (teacher's email).

Sincerely,

[Your name]

Outline of Content for Body of Thank You Note

Write your Thank You note on separate paper. If you handwrite it, make sure it is easy to read.