



Beasley School of Law, Temple University

10 EASY WAYS TO HELP PASS LEGISLATION TO PREVENT WRONGFUL CONVICTION

1. Identify and contact those who cover criminal justice policy issues in the major newspapers and other media outlets around the state.

Innocence-related issues make great stories. While we will be working with some of the larger media outlets, it is just as important to get the word out to smaller, regional papers, particularly those that publish in districts governed by lawmakers whom we hope to influence.

Reporters are always looking for good leads, and good sources of information. Feel free to call these folks cold – if there’s a story or issue you think they might find interesting - or in response to a story that person has written. (Note: They tend to react better if your first call to them isn’t to tell them they got something wrong. Try to establish a relationship with those who cover the criminal justice/legislative beats before that has to happen.)

Editorial writers, too, like to opine, yet cover dozens of different issues. It’s amazing how useful it can be to have educated editorial writers and columnists writing about our policies. Provide them with materials and a quick rap about why the issue merits their attention, and you might be surprised to see the results.

2. Write a “Letter to the Editor.”

Members of the Pennsylvania Policy Committee can be incredibly helpful in raising public awareness of the problem of wrongful conviction through “Letters to the Editor.” Your local law journals and bar publications may well be interested in what you have to offer on these issues. When published there, you can reach the entire legal community, and who knows who’ll then call you to inquire further. If you don’t reach folks, though, they’re certainly not as likely to “get it” and buy into innocence reforms.

The same goes for the mass media. Your organization is still the local expert. Think about writing an op-ed, especially when one relates to an important event or date. Remember to write for non-lawyers, and that the reader needs to be able to both: identify why this means anything to him/her; and be engaged enough to read your piece. Also, each paper has its own guidelines that you should follow. Another good tip on this front is to get an unlikely or widely recognized co-author to sign on with you. Papers love it. Finally, stick to one major point.

3. Call your Editorial Boards.

Some people find the notion of approaching an editorial board so daunting that they hire PR firms to set up a meeting. Luckily, innocence issues tend to be so compelling to Editorial Boards that they will *want* to meet with you. To arrange the meeting, call up the editorial page editor, briefly describe the issue you plan to discuss (i.e. the Pennsylvania innocence reform legislative package), tell them who will be attending the meeting, and ask for an appointment. It is possible that the editorial page editor and the reporter who covers your area will attend. Do not look to these folks to commit to coverage, but make sure you tell them that you are happy to serve as an ongoing resource to them as the issue heats up.

4. Speak on talk radio.

Let’s face it. Even though this medium (on the AM dial) is the relative bottom-feeder of The Fourth Estate, it’s got the ears and minds of many. So, if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. Even the most conservative talk-show hosts tend to be sensitive to innocence issues, and if you can get into the minds of all of these listeners who may not care too much about the Bill of Rights but who know that an innocent person doesn’t belong in prison, then you’re making progress. It won’t always be a walk in the park, though, so be ready for

The Pennsylvania Innocence Project

Page 2

silly questions and approaches from the hosts and callers. The key is to keep on message and remain calm and polite. (And if you can get on a public FM talk show? Chances are that it *will* be a walk in the park.)

5. Present a teach-in (and invite policymakers and press).

Academic looks at important policy topics garner respect from the press, public and policymakers. Especially if they relate to an issue that has been a cause of concern locally. Think about what these issues are or might soon be in your community, and think about sponsoring a teach-in or panel discussion at your school. Have it sponsored by your Dean, or otherwise give it high institutional support. Invite important policymakers and others widely recognized on the issue to present. This heightens the public's attention, and can make the event newsworthy enough to garner media coverage. This way you can get a meaningful look at the issue conveyed to the public at large, and that tends to give the issue some momentum of its own that you should then keep pushing.

6. Encourage students to form their own group

You could also capitalize on the teach-in as a means of engaging students and getting them active in advocacy work. Students care deeply about justice and therefore innocence-related issues. If you make it easy for students to form their own group focused on innocence-related policy, then you have a potential constituency close at hand that is ready, willing, and able to make noise about the need for reform. They could be called upon to call lawmakers, participate in a rally, etc. It's not as good as having the Governor squarely on your side, but properly mobilized, these young people can be an effective force for change. And they enjoy doing it!

7. Create a Facebook Page

Social media seems to be the name of the game these days. Creating a Facebook page dedicated to the legislative effort could help you to create a list of contacts to keep on hand for grassroots work and other advocacy efforts. While you could have just one Facebook page dedicated to the campaign, different student groups could form their own, as long as a system of communication is established between each student group and the Policy Committee.

8. Call Your Elected Officials

Of course at key points during the legislative effort, you can get all your contacts to contact their lawmakers. It is key that calls are made by constituents. It means little to a policymaker when he gets a call from someone that does not represent his/her constituency.

9. Host An Educational Event at Your Religious Institution

Consider approaching your religious leader to see if your church, synagogue, imam, meeting house, etc. is interested in sponsoring or hosting an event to help educate the public about the scourge of wrongful conviction. You can then build your contact lists this way.

10. Speak at a Local Rotary/Kiwanis Club

Local rotary clubs are generally looking for programming to put on their agendas. This is a great way to generate more support for this issue, while also educating the general public. You may want to look for clubs that correspond to key districts where you are trying to sway lawmakers who seem to be on the fence. You can also build your contact lists this way.