Putting WISCAP's state advocacy strategy into action

WISCAP Poverty Matters Conference 2026

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Quick Compliance Review

- Remember: 501(c)(3) nonprofits **CAN** engage in advocacy and lobbying activities so long as they follow IRS activity, expenditure and recordkeeping guidelines

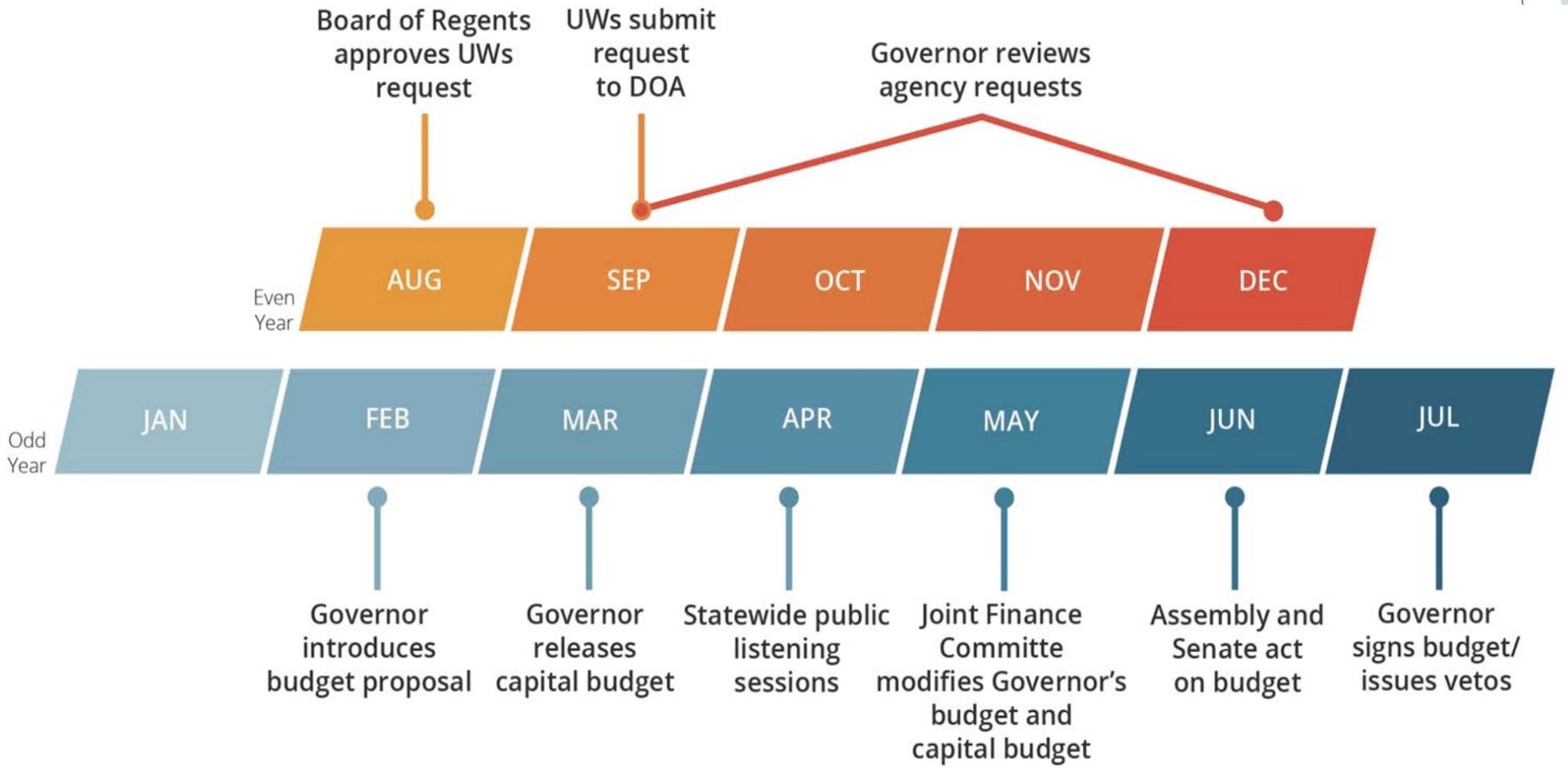
- The state of Wisconsin has **separate** lobbying regulations that apply to every organization that pays someone to lobby on their behalf for more than 4 separate days during a 6-month period (Jan-June and July-Dec). These state regulations focus on the **"3 R's"**:
  - Registration
  - Reporting
  - Restrictions (ethical guidelines)

Quick Compliance Review (Continued)

- There are a wide range of “**advocacy**” activities that neither the IRS or Wisconsin count as “lobbying”
- Don’t forget to double check any **grant or other funding restrictions** against using time and money to fund lobbying activities. Make sure you have sufficient unrestricted funds to support your lobbying activities.
- Still unsure or need more information? Don’t forget to check out **WISCAP’s advocacy compliance page** that is available to all member organizations. This page includes accessible resources and information about how your organization can request timely technical assistance from national experts.

Wisconsin state budget process in one picture

Courtesy: University of Wisconsin Department of Government Relations)



Wisconsin state budget process continued

WISCAP has an advocacy calendar that covers the entire 2027-2028 legislative session. This calendar also includes peaks and participation points for WISCAP members and can be found on the WISCAP member advocacy portal.

WISCAP's Advocacy Agenda

Create a "*Wisconsin Community Action Grant Program*":

- Modeled on successful Minnesota program created in the 1980s
- A state funding stream that would supplement existing federal CSBG funding currently received in Wisconsin
- Program structure would mirror the funding formula, eligibility criteria (for both programs and participants), and allowable expenditures as federal Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)

WISCAP Advocacy Agenda Continued

Increase the CSBG Household Income Eligibility Threshold 200% FPL

- Would be applicable to all CSBG programming and to WCAG (if created)
- Benefits:
  - Would allow CAPs to leverage additional funds to support more people in their communities
  - Increase capacity to meet existing demands for services in communities, including among clients already served by CAPs
  - Improve continuity of services
  - Streamline intake process for program and clients
  - Align program eligibility with modern economic realities and avoid “service cliff”
  - Strong track record in the **47 of 50 states** that have adopted this threshold

WISCAP Advocacy Agenda Continued

Coalition Policy Priorities:

- Volunteer driver insurance protections – top priority of WISCAP members
- Board Policy Committee will consider other coalition priorities mentioned in member interviews during November meeting
- Members should bring priorities to WISCAP and Board Policy Committee for further consideration

Why is this agenda important?

- If passed, WISCAP's budget priorities will represent a significant increase in CAP capacity and flexibility to meet the ever-growing needs of the people and communities you serve.
- WISCAP's top two priorities have a demonstrated track record of success in other states
- This represents a rare opportunity that would allow CAPs to expand the reach of their mission to more people in their communities. Just as importantly, it would allow CAPs to be even stronger partners to other community organizations that are facing ever-increasing demands for their services

Why is it so important that CAPs and allied organizations play a leading role in these efforts?

- Legislators are “generalists” – they rely on experts like you to make informed decisions. Educating your legislators goes well beyond the “asks” contained in this agenda – it also includes the opportunity to tell the story of your organizations, the people you serve, and why you are a crucial part of the community.
- In addition to being an expert, your voice as a service provider with direct experience in the communities represented by your legislators is far more persuasive than just WISCAP or a contract lobbyist on their own.
- In fact, most legislators **WANT** to hear from people doing important work in the communities they represent

Why is it so important that CAPs and allied organizations play a leading role in these efforts?

- The “game” inside the State Capitol is going to be played whether you decide to participate or not. The only question is which players will be on the field?

- What does this mean in practice? “Special interests” are already spending a lot of time and money to promote their priorities all year, which means that a disproportionate amount of attention is paid to those who can afford to play the game. The vast majority of the community members you serve don’t have the time or money to play that game. The nonprofits in this room have a unique opportunity to advocate for meaningful policy improvements and fill that void.

Advocacy 101: A crash course on state budget advocacy

Effective Communication – the Basics:

- **Make a human connection based on shared values** - Tell a real story about your work that illustrates the values that shape your mission, then weave in relevant statistics to fill in the rest of the picture.
- **Use plain language** - Avoid nonprofit or professional jargon/acronyms and use language that someone who isn't a subject matter expert can understand.
- **Use your expertise** - Most legislators and staff won't have anywhere near the subject matter expertise as you, so remember to share both your experiences and professional expertise to explain why the policies you are advocating for are so important and establish yourself as their go-to expert on these issues.

Developing a persuasive “ask” (6)

3 Keys:

1. State the Problem

1. Provide achievable solutions

1. End with a clear call to action

State the problem

Who?

- Is most impacted? Is there is disproportionate impact?
- Based on what you know about your legislator, how does this impact your narrative?

How?

- How does this impact your legislators' constituents?

What?

- What data do you have that demonstrates the outcomes of this problem in their district?

Why

- Why is this a problem that needs to be addressed now?

Provide achievable solutions

WISCAP will provide leave-behind documents that all member organizations and allies can use to help guide conversation to support (1) a state CSBG match and (2) increasing the eligibility criteria to 200% FPL. These resources will provide all of the necessary big picture information regarding these policies. **Members** should also craft their own 1-page leave behinds that provide a narrative and statistics specific to their service area.

Remember: These asks represent achievable and high impact policies, which are exactly what WISCAP membership requested as the centerpieces for the upcoming legislative session.

Finish with a clear *call to action*

This will be straightforward in the context of a legislative visit:

“ … please support the DCF budget provisions to create a Wisconsin Community Action Grant Program and increase the CSBG eligibility threshold to 200% of the FPL”

Getting to know your legislators

- Use their official legislative website and social media sites to know their story, background and priorities
  - If they have supported issues that are important to your programs and communities in the past, you can even thank them for that
- Subscribe to their email updates or newsletters
- If you have never met your legislators, talk to others in the community who know them well enough to inform you about what resonates with them
- Get a sense of what their **core values** are

Use *shared values* to find common ground

- It's not uncommon to have different political beliefs or priorities than your legislators
- That doesn't have to be a dealbreaker!
- Political disagreements are a reality of life, yet often times we can use empathy and shared values to come together and find common solutions to issues that impact our communities
- Remember, empathy ≠ agreement … Empathy = understanding
- Success ≠ immediate yes … Success = leaving the door open for another conversations.
- Examples: Family values, supporting our community, faith-based values, freedom + self-sufficiency

Some final communication tips …

It’s actually pretty simple. Do the same things that anyone does to be an effective communicator and have a good conversation:

- Actively listen (emotionally congruent body language)
- Ask open ended questions
- Integrate the stories and data that you think would resonate best with your legislator based on what you know about their biography, priorities, district and values.

What to expect in a legislative meeting

- Expect to get 20-30 minutes of facetime with your legislator or their staff. You'll need to be efficient about communicating what we've already discussed
- Even though you are an expert, legislators won't expect to you know every minute policy detail. If they ask you a question and you don't know the answer, be honest and tell them that you'll look into it and get back to their office as soon as possible with the relevant information. WISCAP can help you with this. In fact, this is a good opportunity to continue building a relationship and trust.
- It's not a black tie event, but dress professionally.
- Even if you don't agree about everything, always be respectful and thank them for their time.
- Take notes, especially about items that require follow up or other important information WISCAP should know to guide its advocacy work (support/oppose/noncommittal)

Follow up after your meeting

- Share your notes with WISCAP (Link to be shared with members)
- Follow up any information or other promises you made to get back to their office about
- Send a handwritten thank you note
- Discuss any strategic next steps with WISCAP

Question and Answer

