

When we use a word like advocacy, I've noticed a couple of things. And this was true for me about a year and a half ago: that I kind of glazed over and didn't really understand what was meant by that, especially if you used a word like "legislative advocacy" or something like that. I didn't have a good grasp of that. And I did a lot of learning in the last year and a half to understand that.

The good news I found is that advocacy is a very simple thing that we actually know how to do quite well. I think this group especially knows what to do. But I think if we phrase it in a couple of ways, it can be a little bit more accessible and maybe we're more likely to participate in this thing that's really important to the work that we do.

So the good news about advocacy to me is that it starts with a very simple question: Who are you? And most of us can answer that fairly well. And the answer to that can be multifaceted. So in this group, I would say most of us could say that we're either a brain injury survivor, or a brain injury caregiver, or a brain injury professional – some way attached to the idea of brain injury. And it intersects with our lives. It's part of who we are. It orders our steps.

But we're not just that. We're also likely all residents of Virginia. We're also likely residents of a legislative district. And most of us don't spend a lot of time thinking about which legislative district we sit within, and know even – like I wouldn't have known until very recently – who my legislators were. I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about that until I had this role.

And then, what other roles in the community do you play? Are you a neighbor? You're a family member, likely. Are you involved in civic organizations and churches? Who are you intersecting with, and who do you have some influence and the ear of? And I think if we answer all of those things, that's a really great start, because advocacy really begins with who you are and what's important to you in all of the ways you show up in the world.

And then the next step of advocacy is to ask the question: *What do you want to happen?* If I'm who I am, and I'm in this world, and some things are important to me, I probably want some things to change—especially as we're talking about things at the state government level and how do we want our state to utilize our tax dollars to benefit things that I care about?

So the good news is there's a whole group of us: the Alliance of Service Providers and the Brain Injury Association of Virginia, and this council, and DARS. A lot of people are thinking about what's important and what things might need to be done or changed to increase the ability and the effectiveness of care for people with brain injury and caregivers.

So I'm going to share a screen to walk through what, in partnership with the Alliance of Service Providers and BIAV, things you've likely seen in the past: our budget amendments that we're asking the state to consider, the legislature to consider, as maybe some ideas that, as a member of your community, a survivor of brain injury, a caregiver, or a professional related to brain injury, that maybe some of these ideas you would agree with and would want people to understand and see change happen. And so I'm going to share my screen right now and walk you through what we're bringing to the state government as what we believe are important and see if you would agree to that.

You've likely seen this before in previous years. One of the things we talk about a lot is workforce retention. And that's really an initiative or an idea that says if we're often replacing our staff, service likely gets more difficult, and care likely gets more difficult, because a lot of our staff spend time with you, with caregivers and survivors, to understand their needs and develop trust and rapport. And if we're not able to keep our staff because funding isn't great enough for that, and there are better options out there for our employees to go and do other things, we would like to keep our staff so that we can serve better, serve the community better. So that's our first ask or idea that we would say, maybe this is important to you as well. And so we would call that Workforce Retention.

Our second idea is: Strengthen and Expand Brain Injury Safety Net Services. Is this an idea that you feel is important to talk about? Should we have more services available? Should we have more services available to more people? Should there be less wait times? Should there be easier access? That's what this idea, this budget amendment, is all about. And so if that's an important idea to you, it's another way that we're going to make it easy for you to tell the people who might be able to do something about that.

And lastly, at the bottom of the screen here, is kind of a new one for us. We're calling that the Brain Injury Data Modernization idea or budget amendment. And this is really centered around something that's in the background of all the work we do: to understand and to track the good work that is going on across the state in brain injury care and the safety net services. We have a very old system. It doesn't work very well. And that inhibits our ability to make really good decisions and share that information with all of those people as easily as we would like. And I think it does impact our ability to do our work even better. So there's a third idea that maybe you would feel would be important to tell the people who can do something about that in the next couple of weeks.

The good news is we've made it really easy, because the people whose job it is to make that happen is our state government. From the governor, the lieutenant governor, the legislators, and the committees that exist within those bodies. It's their actual job to know what's

important for Virginians living with brain injury and caring about brain injury, and to make decisions based on what they know to be true. So we have something that's true for us, that's important; we have something we have to say and things that we want to have happen. And the good news is it's our right and our ability and responsibility to tell people about that. And there's a whole body of people whose job it is to do that exact work.

And so that's what we really mean by advocacy. It's taking the important things, putting them in front of the people who can actually do something about it.

How to do that? There are several ways to do that. If you scroll down on this page, which comes from our website (biav.net/advocacy), it'll bring you right here. And I'm not going to read everything on this page, and we're going to get to some more action items in a minute. But if you want to know who your legislators were, which I had to do at some point, you can go all the way to the bottom and say, "Who's my legislator?" and there's a whole tool for understanding who you might want to talk to that could do something about these ideas if they're important to you. But I think that's also too complex and not likely for most of us to do. So we've done the work of making it easier to advocate, to share the things that are important to you.

I'm going to go up a bit, and you can find all of those right here. The same three ideas show up, and there are guides to take you through each step. I'm going to walk through one of them on a different screen so you can see what it looks like.

The good news is that we have a technology that we've just implemented that takes these three ideas and gives you a really easy way to tell your specific legislators and others about these ideas that are important to you. So at the top of the page here, right on the right side, it says compose your message and these are the people that will receive this information. Our newly elected governor, your personal state senator and your delegate, and the Senate Finance and the Health and Human Resources Committee, which those groups are legislators whose job it is to advise the rest of the legislature on how to spend money in this regard.

So they're really important people because they're the ones who can actually help us get these important things accomplished. And so you don't have to go anywhere else. All you have to know is who you are. And if you know your name, your address, and your email, it will automatically send this message directly to the people who can do something about the things you find important.

On the left side, it really basically describes what we're talking about: what we think is important, the data, the dollar amounts, all of that. But the real actionable part of this and where we made hopefully simple for you is on the right side. And so we have a little bit of an

instruction. It says, "Please edit the first paragraph of the message body below to make it a personal request. Use your own words and thoughts to express your thoughts on this." So the good news is, you just have to sound like yourself. Why is this idea important to you? How has it mattered to you? What has your life been like? Maybe you've experienced when it hasn't gone right, or an experience where something has gone well because resources were available. This is the kind of thing you can bring to the table because of who you are, where we started.

So we've made it pretty easy. The subject of the email, because this will end up as an email going directly to the list above, we've given the subject for each of these ideas. That's already there. We've also populated the body of the email with most of the data that legislators need to know about. The only part we really need to change is this section here from the 3 dots through the bracketed section that gives you some instruction. And you just need a couple of sentences to say why is this important to you? Who are you? And maybe a little bit about what this kind of idea or resourcing would do for somebody in your experience. And so I've already written a little paragraph to make it easy to add this. And it takes a couple of minutes to think about what's important to you about this, but we're not going to take the time for that. I'm going to just paste it in there, and I'll read it to you:

"It's important to me that the Brain Injury Care Network continues to be available to me, because as a caregiver for my brother Paul, I know how hard the days can be. There are needs that require resources that are easy to find and access. Wait lists and lack of staffing can make hard days seem impossible. All services are not available in my area. Please consider supporting the brain injury care system by increasing funding for this network of care so that it can grow to meet my needs."

Now, I used a lot of words. You can use whatever words are true for you about this idea and why it's important to you. The rest of the email is already written. And then if we just scroll down a little bit, this is where we get to who you are. We can say, I'm "Mr." my name is Dan or Daniel, my email address is dan@biav.net, and yeah, I would like to receive alerts as to is this thing happening in the legislature, and I would like to know what things are going on. I know my phone number, so I can easily put that in, and then my street address. That's not the right one, so I'll put in the correct one. And because I've added that information, you can say yes or no to this, all I have to do next is hit "Send Message". And it's going to tell me the next step – it's going to say "Guess what? We just sent an email to this group of people who can actually do something about the thing that we think is important to do. And on this list is basically the individual names of our legislature and our state government about who's receiving this advocacy. Because we just did advocacy right now. I just did that. And so again it starts with who we are, what do we want to see happen, and who can get it done. And here's a tool to do that.



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THE VOICE OF BRAIN INJURY

So if you go to this webpage, which is biav.net/advocacy, you have each of the ideas and you have a PDF guide about how to actually go through that, because I just went through it very quickly. We're going to also add a video so you can watch it again, and hopefully a transcript but with that, we can do the important work of letting the people who can make the decisions who benefit this care network do that job. And here's what's true about that: they catalog every interaction. They keep a list. They make decisions on it. When we show up in person, it's logged. It matters. So we'll have our Brain Injury Awareness Day coming up on the 10th of February. We should do that work. But this tool gives us the ability to ensure that the most people can say what's true and important about brain injury to the people who will make those decisions.

And if we do that work, then when you go to help a loved one or need services for yourself, maybe there's a better day tomorrow than there was yesterday. This is the work of advocacy. And it's a word that seems big and scary, but it's really not.