



# ADVOCACY IN ACTION

Case Study: Minnesota Social Service Association



## THE BURNING QUESTION:

How can a state association harness its multisector members to effectively advance competing policy priorities in the legislature?

## THE BACKGROUND:

The Minnesota Social Service Association (MSSA) comprises about 3,500 members, all on the front lines of providing essential services to the North Star State's most vulnerable populations. Some members come from government agencies, such as county social services, and others represent private organizations and agencies, which have been a growing force in the state's social service landscape. Overall, MSSA members provide invaluable resources to the communities they serve by delivering critical human services including mental health and chemical health services, aging resources and services, children's services, unemployment support, housing, and more.

MSSA represents a broad range of policy priorities across its active member base, notably strengthening critical social services, lifting up vulnerable populations, and protecting vital public funding for the social services sector. The association's established network is a powerful one with real potential already being realized; individual members are experts in their fields and often leaders in their communities, and due to the very nature of social services, this line of work generates meaningful relationships with not only specific clients but also local and state institutions, agencies, and organizations, as well as in-roads with policy and decision-makers.

## THE PROBLEM:

Though MSSA already had a small-but-mighty in-house government affairs team and strong relationships with legislators and grassstop members, staff historically had difficulty breaking through a crowded policymaking landscape. With a good reputation, a large membership of subject matter experts with real-world experience, and a good deal of young professional involvement, MSSA seemed poised to be able to affect many critical and timely issues—yet constraints on staff time consistently limited the association's impact in St. Paul. What's more, the team's lack of capacity to prioritize advocacy translated into a perception that MSSA lacked focus on specific issues.

The challenges extended internally as well; though MSSA's coverage of both public and private organizations and its geographic diversity were real assets, an overwhelming number of members felt the association needed to more meaningfully engage them in policy work. As pressure on the state budget continues to increase, especially around a broad and expansive policy area covering cradle-to-grave issues, member perspectives are desired and needed at the Capitol to navigate this complex, ever-changing space—but MSSA as an association lacked the tools, direction, and sheer bandwidth necessary to make the changes desired across the health and human services arena in Minnesota.



## THE SNYDER STRATEGY:

In 2019, MSSA partnered with Snyder Strategies, LLC to develop a three-year advocacy strategy. Following a landscape analysis, interviews with internal and external stakeholders, and a detailed audit of existing assets, Snyder Strategies developed a comprehensive advocacy roadmap for MSSA to increase its statewide member engagement over the long term.

The plan centered on the association's most essential attributes – such as its diverse membership, public-private partnerships, on-the-ground expertise, and younger members' enthusiasm – as the team began to deepen its institutional culture of advocacy.

Snyder Strategies recommended that MSSA first start with small steps towards re-engaging internal leaders in the first year and honing a stronger process and legislative agenda before turning toward solidifying core advocates across the existing membership. The second year would focus on MSSA's grassroots base, instituting training programs, and developing advocacy champions for the solidified policy agenda. Then, MSSA could turn to expanding its base network with specific training and recognition programs, as well as infrastructure.

By the end of the three-year plan, MSSA will be better leveraging its strong advocacy assets, its deep potential, and its members' time and investments. Leaders across the association will also have a stronger working knowledge of not only how to advocate and lobby effectively but also how to train and activate others to carry on that work—engendering a statewide network of change agents

## DON'T TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT

Working with Snyder Strategies is exactly what MSSA needed. After years of struggling to redesign our public policy and advocacy program, we just weren't able to engage our membership of over 3,000 health and human services professionals in a meaningful way.

After working with Bethany, we walked away with a three-year roadmap and are well into the first year. Every month we continue to check items off the roadmap and as we do so more and more of our members are commenting on the positive changes we are making! We would definitely work with Bethany again.

— **CHRISTINE ZEISE**

*Former Executive Director, Minnesota Social Service Association*

 **MSSA** Minnesota Social Service Association



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