

How people with disabilities can advocate for themselves

Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

Welcome to Independent Perspective, a public affairs presentation of Western New York Independent Living (WNYIL).

00:00:05

Our guest today is Todd Vaarwerk, Chief Public Policy Officer of WNYIL.

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And I'm your host, Ernie Churchwell.

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Welcome to the program, Todd.

00:00:16 Speaker 2

Nice to be here.

00:00:17 Speaker 1

It's our pleasure.

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You are a person that is knowledgeable about all aspects of government and ways that it affects people with disabilities.

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I believe you have some comments on the state budget.

00:00:31 Speaker 2

Well, not necessarily so much about the state budget, but in advocating for the state budget and advocating for state issues that happen every legislative season, I come across some common questions.

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And I thought I got the opportunity to come on the show today and kind of talk about how people with disabilities can be better at advocating for their rights when they're dealing with policymakers and legislators, because, oh my God, there are so many.

00:00:58

Right?

00:00:58

I live in the city of Buffalo.

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I have a common councilman.

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There's a mayor.

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I live in the state of New York.

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So, there's a state assemblyman and a state senator.

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I live in the United States.

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There's a US congressman.

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There's a US senator.

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And then there's all the people with me being a person with a disability that make decisions that affect my life, right?

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State agencies that fund programs that I work with.

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All of these people, right, need to hear from people with disabilities about things they do right and things they do wrong.

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So, we'll kind of call this about being a constituent, right?

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Being a constituent means that you're under the umbrella that is covered by whatever government entity you're advocating for.

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And the key thing about communicating with legislators

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is recognizing that they absolutely do want to hear from you.

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They represent you, whether you voted for them or not.

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And voting, of course, is another show, right?

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But it's important to remember that they want to hear from you.

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But we need to make our communications kind of targeted and effective, right?

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Okay.

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And there's a lot of ways that you can talk to your legislators.

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Some of them, like we might do a campaign that says, call your congressman, tell them this.

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And that's great.

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You can do those calls and leave brief messages and absolutely legislators will keep track of that.

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But I've found that sometimes the classics work the best.

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Never be afraid at any

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time to pick up and write a letter to a policymaker to tell them about something that concerns you or something that you want them to do.

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Just remember some simple rules, right?

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Keep it to about one page.

00:02:59

Stay on topic, right?

00:03:01

If your subject is you want to talk about paratransit expansion, I'll pick on my fellow advocate, Stephanie Speaker.

00:03:07

She's been doing paratransit expansion work for the last 10 years.

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And for her, it's all about building relationships.

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And building relationships means she communicates with them a lot.

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And the more that you communicate with them about the issues that concern you, you kind of get tied to that issue.

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So, she's well known for being an advocate for transportation and paratransit expansion.

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If you have an issue that you want to implement to help change your community or to make your life better,

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Great idea to communicate with legislators.

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I'm saying to you the best way to start that is to write a letter.

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Keep it simple, about one page.

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Stay on topic.

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Don't get mad or insult people.

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Remember that you know you want to provide respect.

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You respect them, they'll respect you.

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It doesn't matter what political party either of you are.

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It's that communication that's important.

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Stay respectful, stay on point, right?

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And tell them that as the issue, whatever it is, develops.

00:04:14

you'll contact them again.

00:04:16 Speaker 1

Would you believe we're running low on time because you've given such a passionate explanation of what people should do.

00:04:26

I'm sure people will have questions.

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How can they reach you?

00:04:29 Speaker 2

They can always call me 716-836-0822.

00:04:32

My extension is 101 or they can email me at tvaarwerk@wnyil.org

00:04:43 Speaker 1

Thanks so much for being with us.

00:04:45 Speaker 2

Always a pleasure.

00:04:46 Speaker 1

You've been listening to Independent Perspective, a public affairs presentation of WNYIL.

00:04:52

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00:04:58

And I've been your host, Ernie Churchwell.

