

Advocacy School offering community groups, charities, better access to 'the system'

NEWS | LAURA GARZÓN
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Semi-retired lobbyist Sean Moore, having worked for 30 years in public policy and government relations, now teaches about influence and persuasion based on the philosophical principles of Chicago social activist Saul Alinsky, Roman theorist Marcus Cicero, and American social psychologist Robert Cialdini.

"If you want to communicate effectively with someone, you have to communicate within their experience," he said.

This is not just the stuff of theories. There is no formula to being effective, Moore said, but there are tips to advocate successfully, which is one of the main objectives of his new school, AdvocacySchool.org, launched in March 2011.

"Five years ago, I suggested an established, organized, focused effort at developing the internal capacity of advocacy of nonprofit organizations, to make them more effective when dealing with government," Moore, 63, who has more than three decades' of experience in public policy, government relations and advocacy, said in an interview at his home in Ottawa.

"I'm kind of semi-retired now, so I decided to start it and show that it is worth continuing for a foundation, an NGO, or a university," he said.

AdvocacySchool.org is a low-cost, "virtual" organization without classrooms or full-time staff. It offers courses online and in-person at meeting rooms and organizations' offices. The school has 23 instructors and offers more than 25 seminars for individuals, nonprofits and companies whose staff need to learn or reinforce their advocacy techniques.

The school's most requested seminar is "How the system works and how to work the system," which focuses on "organizing one's time, resources and issue management to legitimately influence decisions of government," the school's website says.

Moore, according to his personal website, is also working on a soon-to-be-launched book, "How the System Works and How to Work the System."

Most of the school's workshops are interactive, with instructors trying to frame a discussion and help participants fill in the blanks, Moore said. They help lobbyists think about questions like, "What is it that I am asking for? What are my strategies?" he said.

Training sessions, which can be taught via online webinars, vary in length. The shortest is an hour long and the longest a full weekend. Some organizations have taken sessions over a four-month period, Moore said.

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Toby Trompeter, principal of Trompeter Communications, an organization that offers government relations support services for lobbyists, said schools like Moore's add to the objective of her organization and supporting blog, lobbychampion.com, which "tries to introduce a new spirit of positivity into the often criticized field of lobbying."

Trompeter said this type of training will help generate "a new cadre of unaffiliated advocacy professionals [who] would breathe new life into the profession, helping to rebrand it and help wash away some of the bad odour attached to it through the suggestion of influence."

AdvocacySchool.org offers lessons not only on lobbying, but also on advocacy and how to access resources available to groups and individuals.

One of the newest workshops is, "How to know what you want and get what you need: An advocacy workshop for families giving care." It is a half-day workshop that matches families "to potential sources of assistance in their community," the website says.

The workshop is directly linked to one of the original objectives of the school: to focus on community, nonprofit services.

Fees for seminars and workshops vary. Some of the instructors do pro bono work, but Moore said he wants to demonstrate that the school can be financially self-sustainable.

For a daylong program, the price may range from \$3,500 to \$5,000. Individual sessions, available for novice or experienced advocates, range from \$200 to \$300, and in some cases participants are asked to take prerequisite seminars.

"Most of the revenue the school makes goes to the instructors, and to pay for the cost of websites," Moore said. "I'm not charging for being the principal."

A typical, daylong training course will start with how the system works. Then, three local case study presenters will talk about their past experiences advocating.

The speakers "describe what they were trying to do, how they did it, how it worked out, and what would they do different if they could," Moore said.

In a final presentation, Moore aims to have former politicians and bureaucrats speak from 30 or more years' of experience about how to communicate with decision makers more effectively.

Organizations that have hired the advocacy school include the Canadian Nurses Association, the Canadian Home Care Association, and private companies seeking to train their staff, Moore said.

Graduate students in the University of Waterloo's social innovation program also take a webinar through the advocacy school, he said.

The United Way of Winnipeg Foundation, in collaboration with the Winnipeg Foundation and the Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet) Manitoba chapter, last month hosted a daylong advocacy school seminar called "Influencing Public Policy."

Linda Brazier, director of learning and innovation community relations and capacity building at the United Way Winnipeg, said the seminar was a pilot project to introduce new practitioners to the notion of how to influence public policy.

The workshop, also available to experienced practitioners of influencing public policy, taught new skills and provided "some tools which had been missing," Brazier said.

Brazier said she has a meeting with the Winnipeg Foundation, a community philanthropy group, and the CCEDNet, this week to talk about what is next on the agenda. "We anticipate we may indeed bring the advocacy school back," she said.



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Moore said he now has three goals for the advocacy school. One is to create a local advocacy school in Ottawa, he said, where there is "so much frustration in this town, regarding transportation, bridges, health ... that I want to teach advocacy groups and associations how to effectively advocate."

Moore also wants to develop more materials and readings about advocacy due to "a total absence" of instruction and teaching materials related to organized public policy.

Beyond that, a top objective for the school is to expand its advocacy training for families with disabilities so they can better access government, and the system where decisions are made, he said.

"Last December, the advocacy school went to a conference in Vancouver. I was so overwhelmed by the fights these people have to fight everyday," Moore said. "I realized they were not trying to change government, they were trying to access the system properly, which is what we want to teach."

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