

ADVOCACY:

OTA's #1 Job



Nicole Ganim

*"Everything begins with an idea."
-Earl Nightengale*

Dr. Nathan S. Davis wanted to organize a convention to help stop misinformation on medical cures and remedies. Seeing this misinformation make it to the public, he rallied other medical professionals to create medical education standards to improve public health. In 1847, the American Medical Association was officially created.¹

In 1947, Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus saw that retired teachers needed health insurance. She shared her message of productive aging and sought solutions to these problems. Eleven years later, the retired teacher officially established the American Association of Retired Persons or AARP.²

Christopher James Greicius was eight years old and battling leukemia in 1980. He always dreamed of being a police officer. His community of Phoenix came together to make that wish a reality for Chris. This was the first of many wishes the Make A Wish Foundation would grant to ill children.³

While these organizations don't seem to have anything in common, they all began with ideas that people were willing to rally around. These ideas sought to change something in the world and their organizations, and in turn, their movements grew.

("Advocacy..." continued on p. 21)

1. "AMA History," AMA Website, <https://www.ama-assn.org/about/ama-history/ama-history>.

2. "AARP History," AARP Website, May 10, 2010, <https://www.aarp.org/about-aarp/company/info-2016/history.html>.

3. "Our History," Make-A-Wish Website, 2020, <https://wish.org/about-us>.

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The OTA began similarly. In 1926, a joint committee of the 86th Ohio General Assembly (G.A.) issued a recommendation to abolish the township form of government. Once news of this recommendation spread to the rest of the state, Joe R. Thomas, Ashland County Township Association President, knew he needed to spring into action. However, he needed a coalition beyond his county.

So, he united the other county township associations (CTAs), including Colonel E. L. Kingsbury, President of the Wood County Township Association. Col. Kingsbury took it upon himself to travel across Ohio to speak with the other CTAs to consider forming a statewide association of township officials.

This culminated with a proposal that would create the State Association of Trustees and Clerks. On June 28, 1928, 240 officials from 51 counties started what is now known as the Ohio Township Association (OTA). In turn, not only did townships come together through a common goal, but they also defeated that recommendation. No legislation was ever introduced to eliminate townships.

While you may have heard this story (many times) before, you may not have realized that this was the very first act of advocacy performed statewide by townships. Joe R. Thomas and Col. E. L. Kingsbury used grassroots lobbying to create the OTA and set the stage for the most important function of this and every association.

Did you know townships are in only 20 states, primarily in the midwest and northeast?

Advocating for Ohio Townships

Advocacy is the OTA's number one job. Associations are built from the ground up and serve their members' interests and livelihoods. The mission of the OTA is to preserve and protect Ohio townships, and a big part of that is advocating for awareness and issues that could impact them.

The Oxford Dictionary defines advocacy as public support or recommendation for a particular cause or policy. The OTA uses advocacy to educate legislators and the public on the form of township government. Over the years, primary advocacy goals can fluctuate. While the OTA was founded to preserve the township form of government, and the OTA's goal will always be to keep the township form of government in Ohio, this is not the primary message the OTA promotes in 2022.

In recent years, OTA's advocacy goals have revolved around improving the conditions of townships. Issues like increasing the share townships receive from the Local Government Fund, expanding and reinforcing township authority in their territory, and ensuring townships qualify for federal funding like the American Rescue Plan Act have all been recent advocacy issues for the OTA.

In this issue, we look at the OTA's vital role in advocating for townships, what goes into our multi-prong approach, and how you, the member, play an essential role every step of the way.

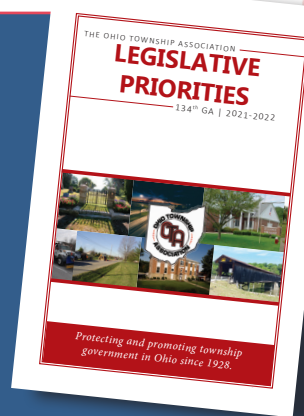
Legislative Priorities

Members' voices largely shape our advocacy efforts. We are a membership organization, after all! Every other fall, the OTA calls on you, its members, to submit suggestions for our legislative priorities for the next G.A. The OTA calls on all the county township associations to brainstorm and share any ideas with our office. Many OTA members may not realize that our bills come from these ideas. Once the office collects these ideas, they are compiled into a document for the upcoming G.A.

But these ideas are not decided alone. The OTA Executive Director and Director of Governmental Affairs work with a lobbying team to develop the priorities. Many factors are taken into consideration, including timeliness of the issue, the makeup of the legislature, and the probability of specific ideas gaining considerable support. The team looks at all the factors and then submits the ideas to the OTA Board of Directors.

The Board of Directors reviews and debates the draft priorities. Once finalized and adopted, they are distributed to members via the magazine, website, and in booklets at the Winter Conference. This compilation is more than just a document. It is used to shape our lobbying goals and create the future of township law in Ohio.

Through advocacy efforts, these priorities are hopefully turned into legislation. For example, the OTA sponsors a township omnibus bill each general assembly. This bill ideally includes as many township-focused ideas and fixes and places them in one larger bill before the state legislature. In 2022, this bill is House Bill 501. This bill looks different than it did when it was introduced, as some sections have been eliminated during the committee hearing process in the House. But HB 501 still encompasses many ideas from the OTA's legislative priorities, like allowing townships to engage in



We want to hear from you!

**Submit your
2023-2024 OTA
Legislative Priorities
to Heidi M. Fought
at fought@ohiotownships.org
by
October 31, 2022.**



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redevelopment to create a special tax increment financing (TIF) district and simplifying the process for townships to donate unneeded property. While this bill will continue to evolve, these core ideas were straight from OTA members.

Lobbying

Advocacy can be accomplished in a variety of ways, but what many think of first is lobbying. Lobbying is primarily advocating for issues directly with legislators and asking them to support or oppose specific issues or pieces of legislation. The Director of Governmental Affairs, Executive Director, and outside government affairs team all actively lobby state legislators and departments on behalf of the OTA. They often meet with legislators to voice the OTA's position on various legislative issues.

These positions can take many forms. Sometimes it is full support or full opposition to a bill. Other times, there is one fragment of the bill that the OTA is opposed to, and we lobby to address that individual section. Each situation is different and, at times, dynamic.

In addition to meeting with legislators,

lobbying occurs in front of committees when bills are being heard. The OTA routinely testifies on bills that affect townships.

Typically, this involves prepared statements outlining the reasoning for the organization's position on the subject. The OTA also asks members to testify on certain issues before committees. Members of the general assembly value the opinion of their constituents, and testimony from their voters can certainly sway a legislator's position. If you are interested in testifying, keep an eye out for opportunities in the Legislative Alert emails.

If you receive those weekly legislative updates from the OTA office, you know just how many bills the OTA is monitoring on behalf of townships. Currently, we are tracking nearly 200 bills in the 134th General Assembly, with more introduced each week.

Now, the OTA does not lobby or voice a position on all the 200 monitored bills. Many of these bills will not become law or make it to the House or Senate floor for a vote. Our lobbying team must weigh our relationships and reputation with our influence. Like many things, our political capital must be spent wisely. There is a strategy and many, many years of experience on our lobbying team to ensure that OTA members have their voices heard.



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Grassroots Advocacy

Another way the OTA advocates for townships is by rallying the most powerful tool: its members. Grassroots advocacy is the act of rallying individuals around a cause. When the OTA needs a large legislative push, we often turn to this approach. Grassroots advocacy is often accomplished within your township. You can educate your neighbors and friends about issues affecting their hometown. Whether done informally at a get-together with friends or more officially, like at a regular township meeting, the simple act of communicating issues to those you know can jump-start a movement and affect change.

It also is encouraged for members to get face-to-face with their legislators to advocate whenever possible. As fellow elected officials, many of you understand the importance of knowing your constituents and their issues, and it is no different with state and federal officials. As one of the most effective methods, constituents can have a back-and-forth conversation with legislators while putting a face to an issue.

Meeting legislators and building relationships with them and their office is key to strong advocacy. Creating these connections is one of the best ways to be heard and get your legislation passed.



Pictured: Advocacy at the state and federal level takes many forms for the OTA.

Tips for Meeting with Legislators

- **Come Prepared:** The best argument is one that is clear, specific, and backed up by fact. If you plan to meet with your legislator, ensure that you and anyone else in your meeting are well educated on the topic you will be discussing. Understanding any opposition and preparing to defend your position considering those arguments would also be beneficial.
- **Make a Good Impression:** Sometimes, the interactions before and after the meeting can influence your issue. Always be polite whether you are meeting in person, over the phone, or even writing a letter. Legislators and their staff are busy people, and serving the public is a stressful job at times (you know that firsthand!). It is important to be friendly, understanding, and gracious during the time they spend with you. Plus, a good impression may lead to additional consideration that wasn't previously given.
- **Follow Up:** Make sure you follow up with the legislator after a meeting. A thank you note or email is appreciated in real life, and it is no different here. It's a great time to remind the legislator of things you've discussed and ensure that the issue stays at the top of their mind.
- **Be Patient:** The legislative process takes time. Some issues take months, and others take years to progress. Building these relationships and moving important legislation is worth the effort and the wait.

Conclusion

Advocacy drives a significant portion of the work of the OTA. Whether it's creating new legislative priorities, gaining legislative support, or protecting townships from annexation, the OTA always keeps its primary mission in mind: Preserve and protect the township form of government in Ohio. Without the OTA and its members' voices coming together, it's unclear what townships in Ohio would look like today, or if they would even exist. But what is clear is that Ohio townships are in a much better place with their state association leading the charge. ■

about the author



Nicole Ganim is the Director of Communications at the Ohio Township Association. She is the primary editor and designer for the OTA magazine, Ohio Township News, as well as coordinates the press and marketing efforts for the association.