HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE
As our state and local governments navigate reopening, each swim school must make sure that our businesses are able to open when it is safe. This is both for the health of our teams and clients, but also for their confidence and peace of mind. Please carefully read your local reopening plans to see where swim schools fit in. As we are a small industry, we may not specifically be listed in the plan. We do need to be allowed to open as early as possible. However you do not have to open until you are ready. This will vary greatly from one community to the next even in the same state.

We have been buoyed by California’s effort. There are several other states following the same path. The Association is very happy to help facilitate these efforts. Please remember that we are a small industry and economic force. Our Association has paid office staff consisting of 2 full time people and 2 part time people. They work very hard and really have their hands full coordinating all that we do. Our board consists of volunteers. The board is not compensated for their time. They are serving to give back to an association that they love. The cost of maintaining a professional lobbying effort for the Association would be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars each year and would be an ongoing expense. We simply do not have the budget to support that.

That brings us to an opportunity for grassroots activism, the heart of our American democracy. Many organizations use grassroots activism to get their message out and influence policy as well as public sentiment. In the case of California, a small group of our colleagues in aquatics organized a larger gathering of swim schools. The Association facilitated Zoom calls to get the process started. The group met virtually to establish and understand their goals. Member Jon Alpert was able to enlist the aid of Representative Katie Porter who had ties to Governor Newsom. This step is key because Representative Porter agreed to make sure the governor got the letter that the group drafted. Member Liz Claytor reached out to two trade organizations which signed on and offered to help with the legislature. The Association helped with facilitating getting our board, National Drowning Prevention Alliance, Stop Drowning Now and Hope Floats to sign on. The Association also created a form so that California Swim Schools could agree to sign on. This was all done quickly as the landscape is ever-changing.

KEY POINTS WE HAVE LEARNED FROM THE CALIFORNIA GROUP:

- The group organized quickly.
- The group agreed on a common goal. California schools wanted to be included in Stage 2 of their governor’s plan.
- They had someone influential that could hand deliver and champion their letter to the governor. This was a local elected member of Congress, someone each USSSA member has elected to office.
- They came together and agreed to a single message. It focused on the business need, and did not include any political expression of any kind.
- The letter was short and came directly to the point. Every government executive receives many letters to their desk each week under normal circumstances. That volume of voter communication has increased incredibly in times of national emergency like today. If you can get your point across quickly, you will be more successful. One page is best for text of a letter.
- They had signatures from swim schools and had enlisted national organizations. This demonstrates many voices and scale that lifts visibility and urgency. Trade organizations get attention as do local constituents.

A number of people have asked that a national letter be drafted. We are happy to do this but a national letter will have little impact on state governors, who are charged with reopening planning and execution. As great as Little Otter Swim School is, the governor of Alaska could care less about someone who cannot vote for them. That is the cold hard reality of this work. I would strongly encourage each state to draft their own letters asking for what they specifically want. There will be different requests in each letter. If you don’t feel you have enough swim school representation in your state to make an impact, consider asking your staff to be signatories on your letter. You could send a simple opt out option to staff with a copy of the letter to confirm their participation.
So take your state specific letter, with signatures from schools within your state and/or your staff and get it out there. Personal connections will get you farther, but work with what you have and don’t forget to take a look at your swim families for connections. You can include the national letter in your packet but this is all an exercise in relationships and service to the people that vote - especially in an election year.

**SOME KEY POINTS FOR YOUR STATE LETTER:**

- **Keep it short.** Limit your letter to one page and one issue.
- **Identify yourself and the issue.** In the first paragraph of your letter state who you are and what issue you are writing about. Avoid any politics as it may cloud the communication’s priority.
- **Focus on your main points.** Choose your strongest points to support your argument. In this case, focusing on drowning prevention and the essential nature of swim lessons is a strong argument. Too much information can distract from your position.
- **Make it personal.** Tell your decision maker why the issue matters to you and how it affects you, your family, and your community. Make a connection to the elected official. California’s Governor has a young family so that was included in our letter.
- **Ask for a response, a meeting or call, and give them a way to get back in touch with you.** Designate a primary and secondary contact. Include contact information in letter and on envelope. Be polite and take a firm position in your letter. Be confident in your understanding of the issue and remember that the official may know less than you.
- **Be prepared for when they call.** There is no guarantee that they will, but highly possible in this environment. It could be an advisor or a referral to another government department. If you can’t take a call at that moment, get back to them ASAP. Remain professional, positive, upbeat and collaborative. A crisis calls out many different types of personalities and these attributes will make serving you easier and more pleasant (just like in our businesses).
- **Share your letter with your state and local assembly persons.** Their degree of influence will vary state-to-state, and by local jurisdiction. This is an opportunity to develop a relationship, or expand on that relationship if you already have one. Very good opportunity for the cost of emailing a letter.
- **Thank the official and their team for taking the time to read your letter.** Thanking their team acknowledges the unsung “heroes” that do the spade work for the elected official. You may never know it, but they have more influence than you think getting you to the “top of the pile.”
- **Follow up in a week.** Show you are professional, serious and tenacious.

The biggest key to grassroots activism - and it cannot be emphasized enough - is having someone who can help steer you in the right direction. Having or finding your champion is very important. A random letter in the mail bag will have little impact. Below are some suggestions if you or a fellow swim school owner does not know someone.

**HOW TO FIND HELP:**

- **Your circle of friends and acquaintances.** Anyone who is involved in politics or works in government.
- **Your local chamber of commerce.** They are involved in these types of campaigns frequently for various issues. They may have someone that can guide you or make an introduction.
- **Local politicians.** Your mayor or someone on city council may know the governor or someone in the governor’s staff.
- **Your broader community circle.** People from your place of worship, Rotary Clubs, nonprofits that you are involved with.
- **Family Drowning Memorial Foundations in your community or state.** The nature of their work may have already given them access and relationships. They may already be working on legislation. Plus they want to see the lifesaving skill we teach to help other children.
- **Families that attend your swim school.** Think about anyone that already knows you that could help. Communicate to current and past clients. Demonstrate your leadership. The vast majority of citizens want progress for small businesses. This is a great way to demonstrate how their family and community get more from their relationship with you.
This is an ongoing effort. You can’t send it and forget it. Designate someone to follow up, and make sure the letter was delivered and learn what next steps are. You will need to follow through and keep the group apprised of how things are proceeding. Ask for help if you get stumped. There may be another swim school owner that has a contact that can help.

OTHER STEPS TO TAKE:

- **Organize.** Rally the troops. The Association will be happy to provide a list of swim school owners in your state. They will also set up a Zoom meeting if needed or you can set one up on your own.

- **Draft a letter.** Have a draft letter that everyone agrees to. Keep the group working on the letter small. A group of 50 people writing a letter can be frustrating and waste time. Starting with a draft letter on the first call gives a starting point and saves time. If the group is large, choose 2 or 3 people to create a consensus letter for the group to approve. If you have a champion who is in government ask their input. They may know what will be important to the person who is getting the letter.

- **Compromise.** Accept the trade-off that everyone’s pet idea or statement may not make it into the letter. There will be other opportunities for our grassroots work, but our priority must be getting our businesses reopened and serving our community safely and with client confidence.

- **Include the National Letter from Association.** If you think this helps include this in addition to your state-specific letter. Do not use the national letter instead of the state letter. It will be weaker and will not impress the governor of your state.

- **Communicate and get buy in.** If you do have a smaller group drafting letter, get a letter back in front of the group and then ask if they will sign on. The Association can create a form to accomplish this. If there are only a few swim schools in your state you could vote on Zoom call and have everyone verify their information. Everyone listing a county and/or city would help a politician realize that your group represents their state broadly.

- **Leverage Social.** One lobbying strategy is to take to social media. There are political leaders that use Twitter to communicate directly with their constituents. This communication tool can work both ways. Consider using Twitter to post the letter with @ (insert governor of their state twitter name) and #learntoswim #swimmingisessential

- **Keep the group up to date and next steps.** This is a marathon and not a sprint. Usually a single letter is not going to accomplish much. You have to keep at it. You also may have to send a series of letters as the situation in your state changes.

- **Keep your chin up.** This is a demanding process. Lobbyists do this everyday and it is hard work. Keep working. The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Do not take it personally if there are roadblocks. Learn. Adapt. Support one another.

*Good luck. Please reach out to the office for help in moving forward.*