

## **5 Myths in SPTAs that Prevent Responsible Social Action**

From the discussion hour: *How to Get Your SPTA Involved in "Social" Issues*  
Facilitated by the Division 44 Public Policy Committee

Psychologists who would like their SPTAs to be more involved or active with community or "social" issues sometimes report that their associations are reluctant to do so. The reasons given for disengagement from social issues are often based on a few key assumptions, many of which are fear-based, inaccurate, or ignore contradictory information. In this document, we debunk 5 of those most commonly reported myths.

**Myth #1. We'll lose support for our guild issues:** Taking a position on community issues will make political enemies of legislators who would otherwise sponsor our bills.

This myth is a powerful one because it pits issues against each other based on the belief that legislators will act consistently across legislative issues (e.g., that if an association and legislator take opposing sides on one issue, they won't come together for another issue). On the contrary, legislators often understand that SPTAs have positions different than party affiliations. For example, conservative legislators may oppose a "liberal" community issue supported by SPTAs but side with SPTAs on their "small business," guild issue. Collaboration with such legislators is also greatly facilitated by taking evidence-based positions and providing evidence-based education, which is recommended anyway.

There are different ways to approach this conundrum, including:

- a) The SPTA registers official support or opposition for a bill that is controversial and takes a data-based approach. Legislators are likely to see that the association is presenting social science data from our field rather than just taking an opposing ideological stance. Associations have experienced several instances where they opposed a legislator on a community issue who later signed onto the association's later bill.
- b) The SPTA registers as neutral on the controversial bill and provides educational data for consideration for the legislators' decision-making. With this approach, the association is not officially taking a stance on the bill, but they still get to inform the discussion by including responsible social research.

**Myth #2. We'll lose members:** Members who take an opposing position on a community issue will leave the association.

Where SPTAs have taken controversial positions, SPTAs leaders have found no significant change in membership. Certainly, there are anecdotes that some members have left because of an association's social issue stance. However, there are also anecdotes from psychologists who joined because of the association's position on a community issue, and still other anecdotes of individuals who leave an organization due to its not taking a stand on a key social issue. Taking an evidence-based position that is consistent with the SPTA's values may in fact bolster member involvement and attract members.

**Myth #3. SPTAs should only deal with guild issues:** “Social” issues have nothing to do with psychology’s guild issues.

This myth ignores the fact that community issues can have marked impacts on our clients and the communities in which we work. When legislation has the potential to harm our clients, we have an obligation to take a position on behalf of our clients. There are also data accumulating that show LGBT people have increased mental distress associated with the introduction of anti-LGBT legislation (e.g., Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009; Russell, 2000).

It is also common for SPTAs to express in their mission statement a commitment to “promote the public welfare” or some similar variation. Associations’ responsible social action on behalf of their communities is often consistent with the associations’ mission as well as empirical research and our ethics code. Note the following from the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*: Principle E: Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity:

Psychologists respect the dignity and worth of all people, and the rights of individuals to privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination. Psychologists are aware that special safeguards may be necessary to protect the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerabilities impair autonomous decision making. Psychologists are aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status and consider these factors when working with members of such groups. Psychologists try to eliminate the effect on their work of biases based on those factors, and they do not knowingly participate in or condone activities of others based upon such prejudices (American Psychological Association, 2002).

**Myth #4. Advocating on social issues cost us too much money.**

Although it is possible to spend a lot of money on community issues, it is not necessary. If psychologists and/or psychology students are interested in providing evidence-based education to legislators and/or the public about a community issue, these activities can be done by them as volunteers. These activities (e.g., letter writing campaigns, writing op-eds, meeting with legislators, public education campaigns, canvassing) can add value to membership: Associations survive by engaging members and having these opportunities can bring in members. One cost-efficient approach is for SPTAs to advocate with coalitions that share the SPTA’s values: Rather than only relying on the SPTA for resources, members can utilize the coalitions’ for support.

**Myth #5. Reducing governance means cutting out advocacy on social issues.**

In a spend-thrift economy, many associations are considering ways to streamline their associations. Some associations may interpret this movement towards less governance as a need to stop engaging in community advocacy. Making a more nimble association, however, does not require ceasing community involvement. Action plans for community advocacy can be carried out without creating more positions and committees. Through member engagement, student involvement, and collaborations with other organizations or coalitions, SPTAs can effectively do community advocacy at little or no cost. SPTAs can reduce the size of their governing bodies while continuing to value community issues.

Note: SPTA is an acronym for State/Provincial/Territorial Psychological Associations

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