

# Launching a Grassroots



**unrwa**  
usa national committee

Building the Foundation



# Agenda

- I. Introduction: UNRWA & UNRWA USA**
- II. Setting realistic goals for a new grassroots program**
- III. Aligning grassroots efforts with lobbying, communications, and policy priorities**
- IV. Identifying the resources and planning steps needed to sustain the program**
- V. Lessons learned**

# UNRWA & UNRWA USA



# UNRWA & UNRWA USA

## What is UNRWA, the UN agency?

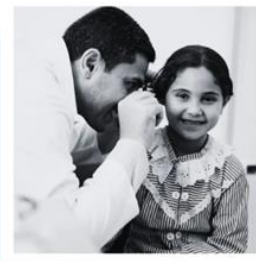
- The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established by the UN General Assembly in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees, pending a just and lasting political solution to their plight. Originally established on a temporary basis, Palestine refugees continue to be displaced and in need of UNRWA's support, more than 75 years later.
- UNRWA protects nearly 6 million Palestine refugees in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria to achieve their full potential in human development, providing such services as:



**Primary education  
for children, including  
education in emergencies**



**Shelter for displaced  
individuals**



**Primary healthcare and  
psychosocial support**



**Emergency relief and  
protection services**

# UNRWA & UNRWA USA

## What is UNRWA USA, the nonprofit?

UNRWA USA National Committee (UNRWA USA) is an independent 501c3 nonprofit that supports UNRWA, the UN Agency, through grassroots fundraising and advocacy efforts in the United States.

## UNRWA USA's vision:

Until there is a just solution to their plight, a world where Palestine refugees thrive.

## UNRWA USA's mission:

UNRWA USA lifts up the voices, experiences, and humanity of Palestine refugees to secure American support for resources essential to every human being, for the promise of a better life.



# Case Study: Building Advocacy from Scratch at UNRWA USA



## Starting Point (May 2023)

- Hired as the first dedicated Advocacy Manager in an org historically focused on fundraising
- Solo advocate embedded within the Strategic Communications team
- Total organization size: 8 staff (now 16)
- Baseline engagement: Past campaigns averaged 200–300 supporters (peak of 2,000 during initial 2018 defunding)

## Strategic Opportunity

- Joined during the development of the 2025–2027 Strategic Plan
- Positioned grassroots advocacy as a core strategic priority supporting broader communications goals

## Results

- Scaled average campaign engagement from ~250 to 15,000+ supporters
- Established a sustainable infrastructure for long-term advocacy growth

# Key Advocacy Initiative: UNRWA USA Annual Advocacy Days

- Launched in 2025, just completed second in April
  - Budget of \$10,000 for year 1, \$20,000 for year 2
  - 20% increase in advocates from year 1 to year 2

2025



2026



# Building the Foundation for a Grassroots Program

- I. Setting realistic goals for a new grassroots program
- II. Aligning grassroots efforts with lobbying, communications, and policy priorities
- III. Identifying the resources and planning steps needed to sustain the program
- IV. Lessons learned

# Setting Realistic Goals for a New Grassroots Program

- **Prioritize quality over quantity**
  - Shift focus from raw list growth to deepening engagement with existing supporters
  - Target specific districts or states aligned with immediate policy goals for higher impact
- **Leverage existing supporter base to become grassroots advocates**
  - UNRWA USA supporters are donors, volunteers, partners, and grassroots advocates
  - Offering multiple pathways of engagement sustains supporters
    - Ex. You can donate, advocate, volunteer, spread the word, etc.
- **Integrate advocacy into existing campaigns**
  - Embed advocacy asks into editorial calendar to balance fundraising-heavy communications
  - Advocacy gives a non-monetary way to engage, helps prevent donor fatigue
  - Keep volunteers energized between in-person events through easy digital actions

# Aligning Grassroots Efforts with Priorities

- **Anchor grassroots advocacy to core priorities**
  - Policy: Restore US government funding to UNRWA
  - Communications: Drive narrative transformation and shift public perception
  - Organizational: Deepening engagement (moving beyond list growth)
- **Put the “why” before the “how”**
  - Situate every new initiative within the broader organizational strategic plan
  - Ask: Does this action directly serve our key objectives? If not, refine or pause
- **Case study: leveraging calendar moments**
  - Use annual observances (e.g., Ramadan, World Food Day) as advocacy entry points
  - Ensure each campaign has a clear link to the primary policy goal: restoring funding
  - Result: Advocacy feels timely and relevant, not disconnected from the mission

# Aligning Grassroots Efforts with Priorities: Lobbying

- **Prioritize legal compliance**
  - Master 501c3 lobbying definitions, limitations, and reporting requirements before launching campaigns
  - Leverage external resources (ex. Public Affairs Council, Bolder Advocacy) for up-to-date guidance
- **Embed compliance into organizational structure**
  - Host internal trainings around each lobbying effort
  - Ensure all staff are aware of lobbying limitations and reporting requirements
- **Align with mission and organizational mandate**
  - Adhere to humanitarian principles inherent to UN-affiliated organizations
  - Stay in your lane: Focus advocacy on policy issues directly tied to your mission, avoid broader partisan debates

# Identifying Resources & Planning to Sustain: Assess your Assets

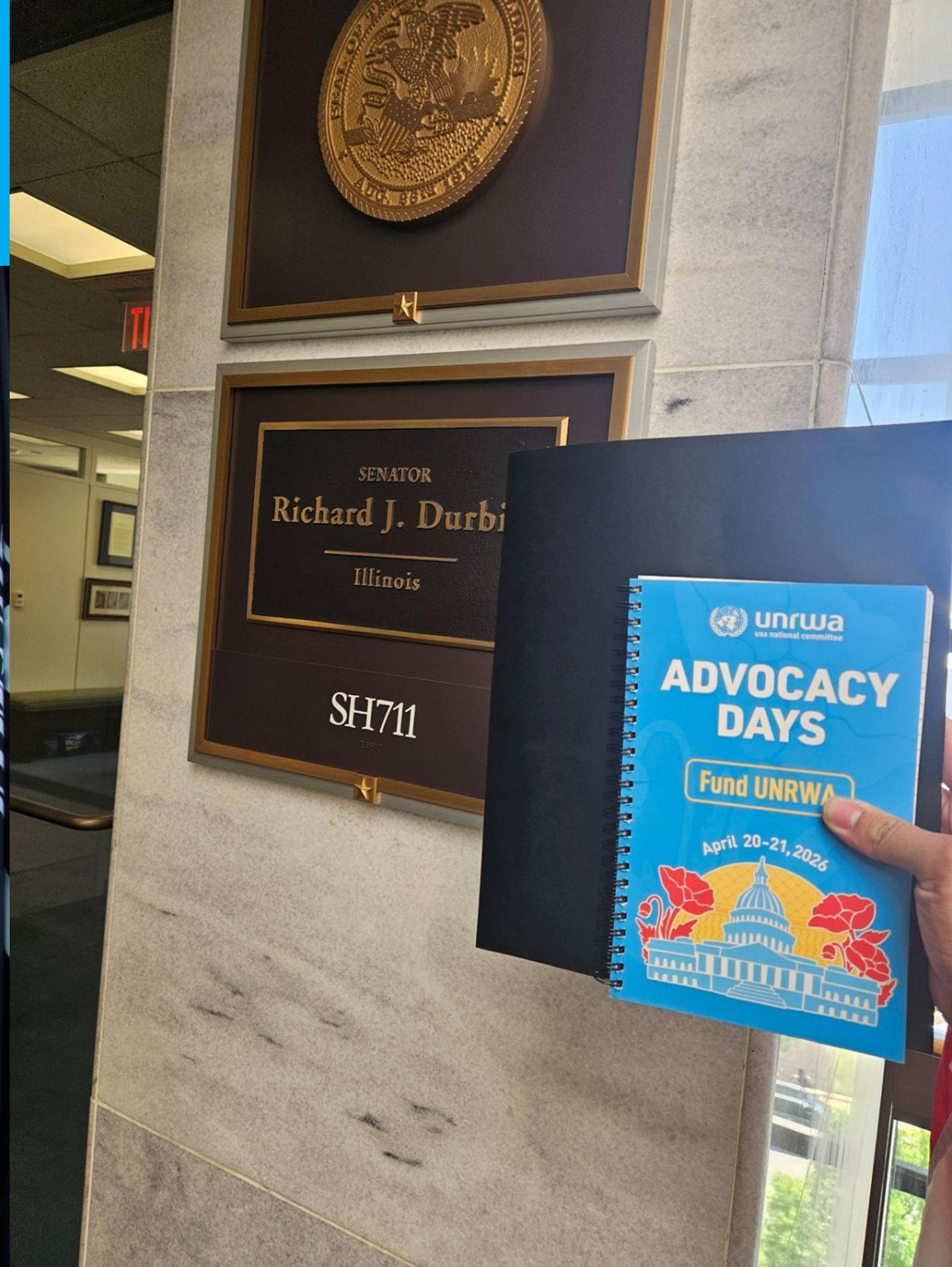
**When building the foundation for a new grassroots program, it is important to identify what resources already exist. What can you build on?**

- **Strong branding**
  - Recognizable brand that invests in Palestinian artists
  - Existing visual identity to build trust and recognition for new advocacy efforts
- **Solid partnership network**
  - Advocacy collaborations build partnerships and demonstrate credibility
  - With a small team and limited resources, partner collaborations are vital to expanding reach and growing support
- **News cycle**
  - Sustained public attention on Gaza and UNRWA since October 2023
  - Baseline public awareness, reducing need for basic education

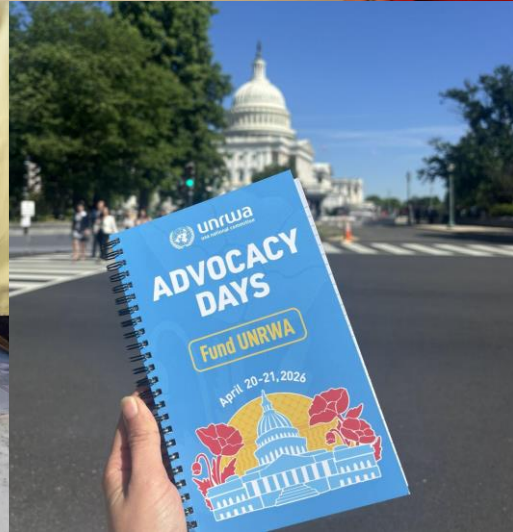
# Identifying Resources & Planning to Sustain: Turning Your Assets into Advocacy Impact

- **Strong branding**
  - Cohesive, custom advocacy branding for each campaign
  - Advocates all receive custom swag, delivering strong branded presence on the Hill
- **Activating partnerships**
  - Coalition building: Led NGO sign-on letters, with over 100+ orgs calling for restoration of U.S. funding
  - Cost reduction: Utilized partner space for advocacy events, minimizing cost
  - Expertise sharing: Invited speakers from partner orgs to enhance grassroots training
- **Navigating news cycle**
  - Combated misinformation by educating the public on UNRWA's humanitarian role, rather than just updating on daily events
  - Balanced timely response with long-term strategic messaging goals

# Strong Branding Builds Cohesive Look



# Strong Branding Builds Cohesive Look



# Building an Advocacy Program: Lessons Learned

- **Think big, but start small**
  - a. Start with a small, high-quality program rather than a large, shallow one
  - b. Invest deeply in your most active advocates; relationships are the currency of grassroots work
- **Grow from what you know**
  - a. After each advocacy campaign, take the time to collect feedback - not only from your advocates, but also from your colleagues, partners, or even friendly staffers
  - b. Spend time evaluating what worked well and what needs improvement and document it clearly. Your future self will thank you!
- **Showcase your growth**
  - a. Use your evaluation data to report year-over-year improvements to leadership
  - b. Demonstrating strategic refinement proves value to management and the board

# Building an Advocacy Program: Lessons Learned

- **Leverage your network for growth**
  - a. Don't be shy to reach out to professional colleagues to learn from their experiences
  - b. There are people who have been doing this their whole career, learn from them!
- **Get creative**
  - a. Try new things! The exciting part about building a grassroots program from scratch is that you have the ability to experiment.
  - b. Adopt an iterative approach: keep what works, refine or drop what doesn't
- **Plan for reality (especially if you are a small team/team of one)**
  - a. Acknowledge your bandwidth limits; you cannot do everything at once. Focus on what you can do *well* with the resources you have
  - b. Block time in your annual plan for high-level strategy, not just execution
  - c. Build in buffer space for emergency advocacy campaigns that inevitably arise



**Thank you!**  
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