

## **Building Support through Advocacy Groups: The Case of Advocates for Responsible Disposal in Texas (ARDT)**

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*[Note: Opinions expressed in this article may not necessarily be the opinions of the STC-HPS or those of the Health Physics Society (HPS) editor, John P. Hageman]*

**Introduction:** As concerns about global warming, the diminishing supply of fossil fuels, and the political and economic dangers of our dependence on foreign sources of oil come more and more into focus, it's becoming increasingly urgent to move the long-running public debate about clean energy toward actual implementation of workable, affordable, efficient solutions. Those of us in energy research and production need to take the lead in educating decision makers and fellow citizens alike about the advantages of nuclear energy.

An important step in garnering support for nuclear energy is to quell the all-too-common fears about waste disposal. One instrument for accomplishing this is the advocacy group. In this article, I will discuss advocacy groups and the essential roles they can play in dispelling troubling myths about radioactive waste disposal, effectively educating and informing the public about radiation issues, and influencing decision makers.

**An Advocacy Group in Action:** An advocacy group is an association of like-minded people who come together to advocate for a commonly held belief or position. To give you a real-life example of the difference an advocacy group can make in the perception, and ultimately the acceptance, of radioactive waste disposal, I'm going to share with you an initiative taken by the Advocates for Responsible Disposal in Texas (ARDT).

Generators of low-level radioactive waste in Texas formed ARDT in 1994 to counter claims that a proposed low-level radioactive waste disposal facility would contaminate the environment. The anti-nuclear group's purpose in making such claims was to derail the development of nuclear power by blocking the way toward disposal of low-level radioactive waste, resulting in a constipation effect — by creating the impression that additional nuclear power was untenable.

ARDT was formed specifically to support the state of Texas in its efforts to identify, evaluate and, after thorough public input, establish a system to manage and ultimately provide permanent disposal of low-level radioactive waste. At that time, the state of Texas was responsible for siting and developing a waste disposal facility, and the Legislature created a state agency — the Texas Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Authority (TLLRWDA) — to fulfill that mandate. Because it was a state agency, TLLRWDA was not allowed to engage in any activities that resembled advocacy. So, the generators of radioactive waste — representatives from nuclear power and other industrial applications, as well as individuals representing the health physics, medical, and university research communities — agreed to form the group to advocate for the state-supported strategy to develop a low-level radioactive waste disposal facility in Texas.

We established the following principles to guide us:

*It is in the public interest of all citizens of Texas to have a safe, technologically sound system to permanently dispose of low-level radioactive waste. It is in the best interest of all low-level radioactive waste generators to have a viable option for disposing of low-level radioactive waste and to have the opportunity for rates that are fair and reasonable. Therefore, it is essential that ongoing low-level regulatory and legislative issues relating to low-level radioactive waste be monitored in accordance with stringent federal and state safety and environmental standards.*

ARDT provided a forum through which advocates of such a system and facility could demonstrate their support. The following were the goals and activities of the group:

- Provide the public, decision makers, educators, scientists, and physicians with information about the need for and merits of a system for managing the waste safely and operating a facility for permanent disposal.
- Provide a vehicle through which the advocates of such a system could demonstrate their support in regulatory (TCEQ and Compact Commission), legislative (state and federal), and public forums.

To accomplish these goals and carry out the activities, we created an Advisory Board of highly credentialed experts who could speak out on the issue with authority and provide balance in media coverage by adding an informed viewpoint. We monitored the media for misinformation that needed to be corrected, and then followed up with a timely and factual response. The Advisory Board members wrote op-ed pieces in the newspapers, sent letters of support to decision makers, appeared on television and radio programs, spoke at local civic and community events, and testified at legislative hearings. ARDT largely accomplished its stated goals, even though the proposed facility in Sierra Blanca ultimately was not approved in 1998. At that point, state policy on radioactive waste disposal underwent a major transformation.

At the time, we needed to be able to counter the claims of the anti-nuclear activists with additional resources. Since many of those activists were younger people, we also sought to cultivate a younger voice in the ongoing debate and formed a student chapter, in addition to the group of highly credentialed experts on the Advisory Board itself.

The ARDT Student Chapter, which has the same purposes as its parent organization, was established in 2002 as an outgrowth of a class taught at Texas A&M University. Students in the University's Nuclear Engineering Department now round out their scientific education with the study of public policy issues. They are required to develop ways to communicate with decision makers about their professions. The course that served as the seedbed for the ARDT Student Chapter, *Technical Communications in Nuclear Engineering* (NUEN 431), was taught by Dr. Ian Hamilton, who also served as Faculty Advisor for the newly formed group. Dr. Hamilton conducted the class to teach students

in the fields of nuclear engineering and radiological health engineering how to distill and simplify a scientific message for any type of audience through effective written or oral communication.

Knowing that Texas state policy on low-level radioactive waste had become stagnant and was on the verge of a tectonic shift in 2003, incoming members of the ARDT Student Chapter decided to try their hand at participating in the forthcoming legislative session in 2003. That year, I worked with the students (that were) in Dr. Hamilton's class as they trained to communicate technical information to non-technical people, learning how to talk about radioactive waste disposal with those who are not scientific or technical professionals.

The experience of communicating with state legislators and their staffs was the ultimate hands-on laboratory for Dr. Hamilton's class. The students learned to testify at legislative hearings and respond to questions with diplomacy and technical accuracy. They spent a considerable amount of time researching the policy issues surrounding low-level radioactive waste disposal. They also were required to become acquainted with the overall legislative process at the Texas State Capitol and practice their public speaking skills. Active listening was also taught as a method of developing diplomacy.

Finally, the students appeared before the House Environmental Regulations Committee and Senate Natural Resources Committee hearings during the 2003 session of the Texas Legislature. Specifically, the students testified on behalf of the development of a low-level radioactive waste disposal facility, illustrating that young people were willing to stand up and support the search for a resolution to our low-level waste dilemma.

These students made a powerful impact on the officials who heard their testimony. Their appearance and performance at the Committee hearings reflected the fact that they were willing to speak out about their future. Legislators found it refreshing to see young faces, a positive and innovative approach to this issue, and a readiness to work on a solution. Under tough questioning, the students offered thoughtful answers. Their interest and involvement in the waste disposal issue exceeded my expectations, and they received a healthy return on their investment of time and energy. The legislation that they were advocating passed!

Too often, individuals who are involved in low-level radioactive waste disposal develop a cynical view of the issue. In contrast, the ARDT students provided a fresh approach to a standard problem, adding a vibrancy and excitement that had been sorely absent from the debate. Previously, young people were often perceived as opponents of nuclear power. Unlike many of their anti-nuclear counterparts, these students were able to rely on their technical backgrounds when responding to technical questions. They took the time to conduct research, cultivate expertise on the issue of low-level radioactive waste disposal, and develop a set of positions and responses based on sound technical data.

The actions of these students can and should be replicated by other students and young professionals in the waste management industry. If we want to be able to pursue

innovations in technology and management, tomorrow's leaders and professionals need to be able to communicate compelling reasons for these innovations and the benefits of having them.

Dr. Hamilton's students represent tomorrow's leaders in the nuclear energy industry. They will require experience in engineering as well as in public policy. Their experience participating in the legislative process offered them a glimpse into an important facet of radioactive waste management — namely, the political side of the issue. It also enabled them to contribute to the solution by taking a new approach to a lingering problem.

For its efforts during the 2003 Legislative session, the ARDT Student Chapter received the *Richard S. Hodes, M.D., Honor Lecture Award Honorable Mention*. The Southeast Compact Commission presents this award to an individual, company, or organization that has contributed in a significant way to improving the technology, policy, or practices of low-level radioactive waste management in the United States. The award presentation was made in February 2004 during the Waste Management Symposium WM'04 in Tucson, Arizona.

**Lessons Learned:** Throughout the process I've just described, we discovered that a scattering of individuals can have a more powerful impact when they unify into one cohesive entity to deliver their message. This type of organized grassroots effort by people who come together to advocate for a commonly held belief or position is an example of democracy in action.

As evidenced by our experience with ARDT, advocacy groups can bring a balanced, educated voice of reason to a public debate often characterized by hyperbole. They can provide an alternate source of information to decision makers and other leaders, and educate the public about radiation issues in general. We found that we were especially effective at achieving our goals by monitoring the media for misinformation that needed to be corrected, then following up with timely and factual responses.

When we initiated ARDT, we started with people whom we already knew and who were committed to the group's mission. This group constituted the hub, which then branched out to encompass additional contacts. As we broadened our concentric circles, we identified and included others who could offer valuable resources or expertise, be it technical know-how, community involvement, financial support, or volunteer potential. Additional candidates for membership included individuals involved in the use of radioisotopes: doctors, researchers, employees at facilities where radioactive materials are utilized, students, and community leaders.

As I explained earlier, we began by putting our case in writing so that we and others who were involved would have a common understanding of what the group intended to accomplish and why. Even if the document never circulated outside our group, it was well thought out and included:

- The reasons our organization was created and continues to exist

- Specific and measurable goals that our group intended to achieve
- A plan of action that articulates how our group would go about meeting its goals
- Fundamental messages our group intended to communicate

It was discovered that ARDT, like other advocacy groups, had many opportunities and venues for getting our messages out, including:

- Direct Contact Activities
  - Letter-writing campaigns
  - Telephone campaigns
  - Personal visits with decision-makers and stakeholders
  - Email campaigns
- Advocacy Events
  - Demonstrations and counterdemonstrations
  - Mobilization alerts
  - Media interviews
  - By-lined articles and letters
- Public Education Activities
  - House-to-house canvassing
  - Study groups
  - Newsletters and flyers
  - Information booths
  - Information fairs
  - Meetings and seminars
  - Hotlines
- Internet and E-Mail-Based Communications
  - Email updates sent to an established list of recipients
  - Web sites or web pages included as links from page of other organizations or individuals
- Facebook, Twitter, and other social media

I recommend that you consider which of these activities can offer your advocacy group the most bang-for-the-buck, and which group members should participate in the different activities. Be careful not to over-commit to too many different activities at once; be realistic about your group's resources and time. It may also be both fun and worthwhile to "think outside the box" and brainstorm about original, offbeat venues where your group could set up a booth, hand out flyers, or participate in other ways. For example, consider getting permission to set up a booth outside a movie theater during screenings of films with nuclear or environmental themes to offer additional information about your issue; explore opportunities to participate as a sponsor or educator in a local museum exhibit on the history of energy; or host a session with a speaker who stimulates

opportunities for discussion or a reading and book signing by an author who shares your perspective on the topic of radiation. Always remember to include your contact information and the dates, times, and places of events you publicize in every written or telephone communication.

Another important lesson that we have come to understand is that in the public sphere, politics dominates science. A piece of wisely drafted legislation will not pass into law based on scientific facts, logic, and reason alone. The concerns of all parties involved must be addressed, no matter how ridiculous they may seem to you. When advocating for your issue, you must develop the skills and techniques to communicate with your audience in a way that will convince them of the need for what you're supporting, and its benefits to the community.

We also have become keenly aware that public perception is a significant concern for any advocacy group. Many people may approach your issue strictly on the level of their own perceptions. When you begin to think that scientific facts are all you need to decide which actions to take, or assume that the opinions of your target audience are based on well-informed, objective research, you have lost your ability to communicate with those whose approach to the issue is based only on perception. You must address public perception before you can speak the truth and logic of science.

No one wants anything they perceive as potentially dangerous near his or her environment, regardless of how safe it may be in reality — period. Some positions commonly taken by neighborhood associations, environmental groups, politicians, and activists opposed to implementing works within their sphere of interest have come into the vernacular with the following acronyms:

- NIMBY – Not In My Backyard
- NOPE – Not On Planet Earth
- NIMTO – Not In My Term Of Office
- BANANA – Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything
- LULU – Locally Unwanted Land Use

When someone takes any of these stances in opposing a project, he or she is demonstrating that his or her values and beliefs about science and technology, process and outcome, risks and consequences may be profoundly different from those that inform your own position on the same issue. In order to establish trust and credibility with those who hold views different from your own, it is important to listen, understand, and be respectful and sensitive to opposing viewpoints, even while remaining firm in advocating your own position.

**Summary:** Opposition groups have been boisterous and incorrect in their message that safe nuclear waste disposal is a contradiction in terms. There are numerous instances in which myth and reality have conflicted directly with one another. Anti-nuclear activists have distributed literature containing information and predictions that have already been proven wrong. When we formed ARDT, we were committed to helping people who

understood the complicated issues surrounding the use of radiation share their well-informed perspectives with non-technically-oriented decision-makers, stakeholders, and the public. We learned that people need information about safe, responsible solutions for radioactive waste disposal. We also learned that the balancing message should be not only corrective but also compelling, forceful, and factual, and that it must address the concerns of others.

Those of us who work daily for safe, clean nuclear energy would do well to add advocacy groups to our arsenal of tools we can use to give our decision-makers and fellow citizens the information they need to make wise public policy choices. We have learned from direct experience that advocacy groups have the potential to serve as a bridge among nuclear energy professionals, decision-makers, and the general public on issues surrounding radioactive waste management in the nuclear age. Furthermore, we grew to appreciate that an advocacy group can perform a wide range of functions aimed at informing the public and allaying outmoded and unfounded fears surrounding an issue. I hope to see a number of nuclear energy advocacy groups springing up in the months and years to come.