



Tips for Effective Advocacy

Legislative Advocacy

Getting started:

- Know your state and federal representatives and senators.
- Begin by asking to speak with the staff person working on the legislation you are advocating for (mental health issues, education).
 - Phone and email are best.
 - Ask to meet with them in the district office.
 - Go to Capitol Hill (D.C. or in your district)
- Be professional, courteous, positive, direct, concise, factual, credible, and specific

When the meeting, phone call or email takes place:

- Begin with informing legislature that you are a constituent. This will open up a dialogue
- Use terminology that they will connect with
 - For example with the Mental Health Access Improvement Act (S.286/H.R.945)
 - Think **expanding** the Medicare Provider Workforce
 - A **SOLUTION** to the behavioral Health Crisis
- Make it personal. Speak from the heart. Share a story that will connect to him/her.
 - Have you had to turn away referrals and/or turn down or stop seeing a patient who was a Medicare beneficiary?
 - As a school counselor, do you shuttle between two or more schools, or deal with an unreasonably high student caseload?
 - Do you know of students, children, or family friends with mental, emotional, or substance-use related problems interfering with their learning or ability to hold a job?
 - Have the recent Medicaid rate and reimbursement rate reductions had an impact on your practice?
 - Medicare examples:
 - One that I used in D.C. in July was about my mother-in-law who is elderly. She had recently had a stint in the geriatric rehabilitation program at our local hospital. She could not find a provider for mental health care under current Medicare law.
 - Many of our legislators probably have elderly parents or at minimum know someone who qualifies for Medicare
- Do your homework.
 - Look at the legislation your legislators have supported and use it

- Keep it simple; avoid jargon and acronyms
- Thank them. Leave a business card.
- Follow up with letter to staffer and/or legislator with an offer of assistance in the future.
 - Follow up with any information/research you have offered to provide.

Don't

- Don't give inaccurate information or purposely lie.
- Don't get sidetracked or go off message.
- Don't get defensive or badmouth the other side.
- Don't get upset if you can't meet with your Representative or Senator.
- Don't send form letters or emails.
- Don't be argumentative or abrasive.
- Don't cover more than one subject, unless asked.
- Don't write a letter longer than one page.
- Don't give up.
- **BIGGEST DON'T:** Don't forget to follow-up with the information you promised

Elected officials often share common characteristics that we can use in our advocacy efforts. Knowing these, and how to take advantage of them, can dramatically improve your chances for success.

- Elected officials like to be asked for help. They focus on issues deemed important to those that elect them (their constituents). Therefore, we must make them aware of the problem, provide background information, suggestions for solutions, and ask them for their help.
- Elected officials do not know everything. Elected officials are asked to cast votes on a variety of legislative issues, many of which they know little about. A good politician is open for information. Be that source.
- Elected officials have many demands on their time. Just like us, politicians have more to do than they have time for. So don't waste their time. Do not overload them with demands. Do what you can to make their job easier by framing it as important and achievable. (see tips above)
- Elected officials have few resources. Often, especially at the state level, legislators have to cover a lot of issues with a small staff. The more you can do to provide information and resources the better.
- Elected officials are always running for office. Politicians have two jobs: making policy and running for office. They are very responsive to constituents so when you can, take at least one other constituent with you.
- Elected officials like getting to know constituents. Have you seen your representatives in your local area recently (at least on the news)? You bet. It is rare for a politician to turn down an audience of constituents. Perhaps arrange a reception, breakfast, town hall so your chapter/division can meet and interact with the officials. Go to their district offices and capitol offices (if you can).
- Elected officials like being thanked. Who doesn't? Congratulate them on recent legislation that you connect with. Express gratitude for the official for being present in the community. Being thanked is memorable.