

## **Advocacy 101: Meeting with your member of Congress and his or her staff**

Nothing is more satisfying than to engage in a conversation with someone with mutual interests and understanding. Even when there is an uneven level of knowledge or interest you can still find satisfaction in helping to increase an individual's appreciation and understanding of your opinion or ideas. The ability to bridge a knowledge-gap is often influenced by how well you know the other individual or individuals. Like students in a classroom, each day creates an opportunity to increase their knowledge and understanding, yet this increase requires persistence and clear, repeated articulation. The ability to present information articulately also improves as your own knowledge and understanding increases. We feel most confident discussing what we know.

So consider an individual or individuals with limited knowledge of an issue of interest to you and how their relationship with you impacts their willingness to consider your point of view. Long standing, collegial relationships provide the opportunity to share more. Newly formed or adversarial relationships provide less opportunity. Therefore, establishing and nurturing relationships allows for sharing more about what interests you and learning from others what interests them. This relationship development and sharing of information that is important or meaningful to you and others is the basis of advocacy.

For reasons reflected in the religious and non-religious philosophies of Western civilization, this relationship development to share information is integral to the maintenance of the United States' unique form of democratic governance. The almost compelling need to join into groups or communities of mutual interest formed the early foundation of both our national society and our government. This community-forming predilection and expectation amazed the well-known chronicler of American society, Alexis De Tocqueville. It is the fact that we continue, but sometimes forget, this expectation of participation that the United States remains unique among democratic nations. It is why we join clubs and organizations based on mutual interests and concerns.

So why does the idea of visiting with a member of Congress, your state legislator or their staff invoke such consternation among so many individuals? We are inclined, as a society, to share knowledge and look for others that share our opinion on issues of the day or of mutual benefit. As educators, you are not unfamiliar with the "show me" or "prove it" attitude of some individuals. It is your knowledge and understanding of an issue that allows you to bring others along, maybe not all the way to your side of the issue, but to a position of mutual agreement of the importance of sharing information. Overtime, through persistence, reluctance may turn to agreement. Without personal effort lack of understanding cannot be overcome or new knowledge gained. Persistence is another word for advocacy.

Advocacy refers to an educational process of influencing a member of Congress's opinion on a particular issue. Advocacy is more successful if you have developed an ongoing relationship with the member or his or her staff. This is relatively easy to do. Health and education issues do not disappear just because federal funding fluctuates. Hill staff need to know how academic pharmacy works, through teaching, research and service, to improve both education and health. An exciting and yet aggravating aspect of Congressional action is that it is often sporadic and often arcane in its process. Staff are challenged to keep all the data and details of any issue in the front of their mind and easily accessible. A staff member with an ongoing relationship with an AACP member are more likely to turn to that member as a resource when legislation is being developed that addresses a particular health or education issue.

Establishing a relationship is relatively easy and can be accomplished in person, over the phone, through email or social networking platforms. The importance of a communication or its timeliness will depend which one you will utilize. When you are interested in establishing a new working relationship with an office a personal visit is the best option. Whether you are interested in meeting the member him or herself or a member of his or her staff, in your state or in Washington, the in-person visit is not a difficult undertaking. Simply call the Washington, state or district office and ask to set an appointment. An initial visit is best undertaken with the staff person responsible for overseeing the issue area you would like to discuss.

### **Scheduling a visit**

#### Call the office:

When you call for the appointment you should introduce yourself and state your title to the person answering the phone. If you would like to discuss a healthcare related issue ask to set an appointment with the person responsible for overseeing healthcare issues. If you would like to discuss an education issue set an appointment with the person responsible for overseeing education issues. Be prepared to tell this individual some basic information about the issue you would like to discuss with them. If possible, forward any supporting documents to them prior to your meeting so they might be prepared and ready to engage in a productive conversation.

#### Keep the appointment:

Arrive on the day and time scheduled. Do not be disappointed if you have to meet in the office foyer or even the hallway. You are one of many meetings going on at any one time, especially in the Washington office. If you are unable to keep the appointment call the office as soon as you can to cancel or reschedule the meeting.

#### Start the conversation:

Introduce yourself and briefly describe the reason for the meeting. During an initial meeting you can always feel confident in stating you would like to serve as a knowledge resource to the staff person and their boss as they work on health, education (or whatever your area of expertise or interest might be ) issues. Rarely will you find a staff person that is reluctant to accept an offer of assistance from an educator or content expert.

#### Continue the conversation:

Ask the staff person what particular health, education or other issues are of importance to his or her boss. There is no expectation of you having to immediately respond to this disclosure, but it serves as the basis of continued interaction between you and the office so listen carefully, take notes.

#### Close the conversation:

Most meetings will not exceed 15 minutes due to the time constraints of staff. Remember, you are one of many individuals and groups that will meet with them today. Remind them that you want them to consider you a resource as they work on issues relevant to your area of interest or expertise. Leave any additional supporting documents with them at this time and make sure you leave a business card and receive one from them. Thank them for their time and state that you look forward to continuing your working relationship.

Send a thank you:

When you return home or to your office send a short note of thanks to the staff person. Summarize your conversation and provide them once again with your contact information. This is appropriate etiquette and serves as another reminder of your interest in serving as a resource to them. If you promised to provide additional information do so in a timely manner. Restate your interest in assisting them with issues of mutual interest and concern.

Maintain the relationship:

Regularly share, via email, with the staff person articles, reports, or other information relevant to the issues you discussed during your most recent visit that were determined to be of continued interest to the staff person and his or her boss. Make sure that you provide a personal insight or statement about the information you are sharing to strengthen the fact that you are a reliable resource. As your relationship grows, you will be able to ask more direct information seeking questions regarding legislative activity or actions of the staff member's boss. Now bound by common interest your relationship can grow and flourish and when the time is right your advocacy will pay great dividends.

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