

TIPS TIPS

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Conducting a Grassroots Advocacy Effort

by Matt Farber, MA

Grassroots efforts can be a very important tool when dealing with local and national governments on healthcare-related issues. Just as various reasons exist for undertaking a grassroots campaign, groups can employ a variety of methods. With any grassroots endeavor, keep the following concepts in mind.

Grassroots efforts can be proactive or reactive; however, most fall into the reactive category. When a bill is introduced in Congress, or when the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid (CMS) proposes a new rule that may have negative implications for your hospital or practice, you may act in “reaction” to that bill or proposed rule. On the other hand, proactive grassroots efforts are launched even when no bills or rules are currently on the table. Because proactive campaigns can help build a relationship with elected officials and their staff, they can be just as effective, or even more effective, than reactive efforts. Examples of proactive efforts include an invitation for a site visit to your cancer program or an educational outreach effort to help the legislative staffer better understand the complexity of cancer care today and how Medicare reimburses for anticancer drugs and drug administration.

Advocacy “Do’s” and “Don’ts”

I cannot stress enough the importance of remaining polite, confident, and not getting discouraged after meetings. Elected officials and their staff are very busy with numerous issues in their portfolio. If you are assigned to meet with a Legislative Assistant, and not the Representative, do not get discouraged. These meetings can be just as—if not more—productive than meeting with the Representatives themselves. Legislative Aides may be better versed on some of the issues, and these staffers brief the elected officials every day. You can use this situation to your

advantage. While many staffers may be educated on these issues, they do not know the complexities you face every day in your cancer programs. Therefore, you can use this opportunity to educate staffers about how things are in their district, and you can offer to be a resource whenever they need more information.

Tools and Resources

Among the advocacy methods you can use to get your message across are office visits; phone banking; a letter writing campaign; an email campaign; blast faxes; or “net-roots” (creating a website or blog to get your point across). Each method has positives and negatives, and they do not have to be used alone. Some of the best efforts may include a letter writing campaign followed by office visits and finished with emails thanking representatives and staffers for their time and attention.

Whatever method you use, be prepared to speak about the issue and to answer questions. If you are making phone calls, devise a script. If you are writing letters or emails, clearly state your stance on the issue up front and why it is important to you. Be sure to relate any information back to the State or the District of the person you are contacting. Elected officials *always* want to hear about how an issue might affect their constituents. If you have research on how many patients a new Medicare policy will affect in a certain state, for example, include that information in the materials you prepare. Remember, you will have a limited amount of time to inform the staffers of the issues, where you stand on the issues, and how you would like the Representatives to vote on the issues. If you are going to a meeting in the Washington office or in your state capital, have talking points prepared so you can reference them if you get nervous or off track.

In the end, remember the following

Advocacy “Do’s”

- Make appointments
- Be polite and courteous
- Research the topic
- Explain the issue and the ways in which it may negatively or positively affect your hospital or practice
- Explain how the issue will affect them and their constituents
- Offer your help
- Set up a website to support your cause

Advocacy “Don’ts”

- Pester or threaten representatives or staffers
- Offer bargaining chips
- Go to a meeting unprepared for questions
- Give up after one try
- Get discouraged.



key points. First, do not get discouraged. Your group is probably not the only group advocating on this issue. If you are pushing for the passage of a new law, you can assume another group with an opposing point of view is advocating against the new law. Should your efforts fail on one bill, keep at it, and hopefully you will be more successful the next time. Finally, although we would all like to believe that it is our efforts that affect how lawmakers vote on issues, many other factors are at play. Representatives may be getting pressure from their Party or from their fellow Representatives as much as they are getting pressure from the voters in their district. Elected officials have to weigh their decisions among the various groups. Your voice heard is vitally important; however, and if representatives do not know where your group stands on an issue, then they will not be able to take that into consideration. 🗣️

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