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Partnerships Pay off

Robert T. Clarke

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he signing of Assembly Bill 1985 (AB 1985) by California Governor Pete Wilson, which will result in greater access to off-label drugs for patients with lifethreatening illnesses, is an outstanding example of how partnerships in the oncology community can impact patient care. The organizations involved in this effort included the California Division of the American Cancer Society, the LIFE AIDS Lobby, AIDS Project Los Angeles, the Association of Northern California Oncologists, the Medical Oncology Association of Southern California, the Oncology Nursing Society, the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, the Medical Group Management Association, and the Susan Komen Foundation. Here is how the partnership led to the bill's passage.

The legislation was originally developed based upon discussions between staff of the LIFE AIDS Lobby and ACCC Executive Director Lee Mortenson, and it mirrored the ACCC model off-label legislation. Assemblywoman Jacqueline Speier was chosen as the sponsor. The first attempt at passing the legislation was vetoed by the previous governor. AB 1985 was the reintroduction of that legislation in the 1991–1992 legislature.

Once the bill was reintroduced, participants shared updates of their activities, copies of materials distributed to their memberships, and ACCC provided input on the lessons learned from ongoing legislative initiatives in other states. Staff had conversations with legislators and aides, educating them on the problem of off-label denials and the need for action. The efforts of the AIDS and oncology communities met with success: the bill was approved by the Assembly. But the effort was far from over; it still required approval by the influential Senate Insurance, Claims and Corporations

RESIDENT'S CORNER

Partnerships pay off

Committee. If that happened, approval by the full Senate was viewed as likely.

In preparation for a hearing before the committee, ACCC Public Policy Director Jamie Young and other key players visited each of the committee members. The testimony they presented at the hearing convinced the committee to approve AB 1985 by a 6 to 1 margin, despite opposing testimony by the insurance industry. Following approval by the full Senate, one final step remained: obtaining Governor Wilson's signature.

The oncology community faced a major hurdle in obtaining the Governor's approval. At a time when California was facing a burgeoning budget crisis, the Department of Finance released an analysis of AB 1985 that estimated a potential cost to the state of \$10 million in increased insurance premiums for its employees. With the help of ACCC's Industry Advisory Council, a rebuttal analysis, demonstrating the bill's cost effectiveness and potential cost savings, was prepared and sent to the Governor. All involved parties disseminated copies of the analysis to the Governor's office through their own channels. ACCC's legal counsel helped to secure access to Governor Wilson's key advisors.

The oncology community's strategy to attack the problem at both a grassroots level and through a direct campaign in the Governor's office worked. Governor Wilson chose to overrule the Department of Finance's veto recommendation and signed the bill into law.

There is strength in numbers, but the partnerships necessary to attain those numbers can be difficult to forge. The passage of AB 1985 (and SB 1533 in my own state of Illinois) shows that when patient care is at stake, the oncology community can become a cohesive, effective advocacy body. Congratulations and thanks to all who participated!

Robert T. Clarke, M.H.A.