



*From the surgical suite
to the state capitol:*

**FELLOWS ELECTED TO
STATE AND LOCAL POSTS**

by Melinda Baker, State Affairs Associate,
Division of Advocacy and Health Policy

Surgeons can serve as advocates at the state and local levels in many different ways: writing letters to legislators, meeting with elected officials, participating in coalitions centered on a specific issue, or becoming involved in an election. All of these activities have a significant impact on advocacy and keep the wheels of democracy turning.

A few Fellows of the College have taken their advocacy efforts to a higher level by running for state and local offices. Not surprisingly, the same passion to serve that drives someone to be a surgeon can also push that individual to run for public office. The attitude of a caregiver toward a patient is easily translated to public service and care for an entire community.

Electing Fellows

Only a small percentage of Fellows have run for state or local office. Running a campaign can be a grueling effort, taking precious time away from the surgical practice. Campaign event schedules can be intense, culminating in exhilaration and anxiety on Election Day. And, of course, victory is not guaranteed.

The College has identified a number of surgeons who have taken their desire to serve from the surgical suite to their state capitol domes, including the following:

- Rep. Bill Chase, MD, FACS (D-NH)
- Rep. Don Van Etten, MD, FACS (R-SD)
- Sen. Dan Foster, MD, FACS (D-WV)
- Rep. Eric Munoz, MD, FACS (R-NJ)

In addition, Tim Mahoney, MD, FACS (I), has recently started his political career on the Fargo, ND, City Commission.

Why run for office?

Although they are from different political parties, serving in different chambers all across the country, most Fellows who have been elected to public office did so for one reason: to make a difference in their communities. Representative Van Etten took the challenge in large part to help shape the community for his 11 grandchildren, and Representative Munoz decided the forces pushing

medicine in New Jersey were too great to not get involved. Representative Chase decided he “had something to say and wanted to help change the way education is funded in New Hampshire.”

Of course, before a surgeon is elected and may legislate change, he or she must be a candidate. A theory among political operatives is that it doesn’t matter how great a politician someone could be if he or she is a lousy campaigner. Candidates are often (but not always) recruited by local party leaders and are picked from smaller local boards. Representative Munoz and Commissioner Mahoney were asked to fill vacancies left by others, whereas Senator Foster was asked to run 10 days before the filing deadline.

Senator Foster had this advice for other physicians looking to get involved in the political process: “You have to be passionate, want to help, and be a hard worker. You also have to get elected, which is not as easy as it sounds. You need to learn *how* to get elected.”

In New Hampshire, the State House is especially large, meaning each representative district comprises a very small geographic area. Representative Chase spent approximately \$500 on his campaign, knocked on 400 doors in three towns, and defeated an 18-year incumbent. “It’s hard work, but I enjoyed getting out there and meeting all the different people in my community. I just wanted to be able to give back to my community and make a difference... [and] have a life that matters.”

Timing is just as important as passion when it comes to running for political office. Before you decide to run for political office, check with your ACS state chapter and your state’s medical society.

Factors that make a difference

The surgeons interviewed for this article all agreed that education, of themselves and of their colleagues, is key to success in politics. “Both sides are equally passionate about their side of an issue. You need to learn to educate passionately too,” Commissioner Mahoney said.

Representative Van Etten had similar advice. “I’m the only doctor in a legislature of 105. Surgeons are logical and analytical thinkers. Many are surprised by the fact that that’s not necessarily how decisions are made in politics,” he said, add-

Pictured opposite, clockwise from upper left: Representative Chase, Senator Foster, Dr. Mahoney, Representative Munoz, and Representative Van Etten.

ing, “You can’t get married to a bill. You have to educate your colleagues and your constituents on why it’s important and that could take a while. You need to plan ahead. Take small steps.”

Representative Munoz has found that his time-management skills, which are essential for a good surgeon, are helpful in the legislature. “But as a surgeon,” he says, “you are isolated in your knowledge of the system.”

Once elected, most surgeon-legislators agree that regardless of their committee assignments, they are seen as the de facto resource for health matters—legislative and personal. “You need to be accessible to your colleagues on both sides of the aisle,” said Senator Foster.

Health issues matter

Not all of the legislation that elected Fellows work on is related to health care. Representatives, senators, and other elected officials will have limited success if they focus on only one issue. However, because the number of physicians in the state legislatures is limited, Fellows are in a unique position to influence health care in their states.

For example, Representative Chase is currently working on legislation that would help untangle the process of organ donation. In New Hampshire, when people indicate on their driver’s licenses that they want to be organ donors, that information currently sits in the Department of Motor Vehicles database and is not shared with any other agency or health care provider. Representative Chase is working on a bill that would connect that information to the New England Organ Bank.

Meanwhile, Senator Foster is currently working on legislation to increase access to common procedures to help decrease the number of uninsured persons and participating on the West Virginia Healthy Lifestyle Coalition Steering Committee. Convened in May 2005, the coalition is charged with encouraging and supporting healthy lifestyles in the state within four broad categories: Healthy kids/schools, healthy employees, healthy communities, and healthy supports.

Representative Munoz was one of the sponsors of the New Jersey Smoke-Free Air Act, which went into effect April 15. This act prohibits smoking in all indoor public places. An exception in the bill allows smoking in Atlantic City casinos. Several

legislators are trying to close that loophole in the next legislative session.

Representative Van Etten is promoting a ballot initiative for the November 2006 election, which would increase the South Dakota cigarette excise tax by \$1.00 per pack and increase the smokeless tobacco excise tax from 10 percent to 35 percent of the wholesale price. The first \$5 million generated through the tax would be allocated to tobacco prevention, after which 34 percent would go to pay for Medicaid costs for smokers. Another 33 percent would go into a trust fund, and the remaining 33 percent would go to property tax reductions.

Get involved

Besides running for office, all surgeons can participate in a broad range of advocacy activities at the grassroots level, such as writing letters, meeting with legislators, and so on. Surgeons who want to participate in advocacy efforts in their states, learn about current legislative issues, or update the College’s State Affairs staff about potential issues in their states should contact Melinda Baker at 312/202-5363, or via e-mail at mbaker@facs.org. Ω

Author’s note: The College would like to facilitate interaction among Fellows who are serving in elected positions in state and local governments. Please let us know if you have been elected to office so we can include you in this effort.