

SURGEONS ON THE MOVE

“ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL”:



*The
importance
of
grassroots
advocacy*



by

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Former U.S. House Speaker Thomas “Tip” O’Neill (D-MA) once famously said, “All politics is local.”¹ This phrase continues to bear repeating when discussing advocacy in our nation’s capital. Lobbyists in Washington, DC, can only accomplish so much. To really persuade members of Congress to take a specific stand, constituents need to get involved and show that the issue is of importance to the folks back home.

The reason a letter, e-mail, or phone call from a congressperson’s district carries more weight than that of a DC lobbyist is at least partly attributable to the fact most elected officials want to remain in office. To reach that goal, they need votes, which are, of course, cast by their constituents. Members of Congress know precisely who determines whether they return to the House every two years or to the Senate every six years.

So although the lobbyists in the American College of Surgeons’ Washington Office can serve as the representative eyes, ears, and voice of surgery in our nation’s capital, their ability to influence legislators is limited. Members of Congress depend on lobbyists to keep them informed, but they depend on individuals who live in their districts to tell them how the legislation affects their constituencies.

Hence, surgeons who are concerned about the degree of government involvement in their lives and who have opinions they want expressed regarding laws or regulations need to be involved in the political process. Elected officials are sensitive to their constituents’ views and want to hear from the voters. Surgeons who believe it is a waste of time to contact and meet with their legislators should realize that other individuals, some with different agendas, are willing to make the necessary commitment. Their views are likely to be the ones that members of Congress will remember when voting.

Effective lobbying

The word “lobbyist” became part of the legislative lexicon in the mid-1800s, when members of Congress did not have Washington residences and stayed at the Willard Hotel near the White House during the legislative session. Businesspeople and others who wanted to communicate

their views on legislative issues would wait in the lobby of the hotel, hoping to speak with lawmakers walking to or from their rooms.

Today's professional lobbyists—including the staff of the College's Washington Office—are far more organized and seek to persuade elected officials to adopt policies in a group's best interest. The diversity of groups that have lobbyists in Washington is virtually endless, ranging from manufacturers of ready-made concrete to the government of Costa Rica.

The most common form of lobbying involves educating legislators and their staffs. Often, elected officials are truly knowledgeable about only a few issues, typically those related to their past careers or personal avocations. They rely on lobbyists to give them the facts on the broad spectrum of topics debated on Capitol Hill, including how a policy would affect constituents and who favors or opposes an approach. People who lobby must provide reliable, timely, and consistent information, or the next time, the congressperson may be unwilling to listen. So the goal of lobbyists is not necessarily to convince, but to inform, policymakers so they make decisions using the best available evidence.

Similarly, "constituent lobbyists" need to establish themselves as trusted resources for their members of Congress and their staffs. They should be the individuals who legislators immediately think to consult when they need to know how a certain issue could affect the people in their congressional district.

Surgeon advocates planning to visit the District of Columbia are encouraged to contact the College's Washington Office to arrange Capitol Hill visits. Such meetings can be useful. However, constituents are more likely to meet directly with their legislators instead of staff if they arrange a visit to their representatives' or senators' district offices. Members of Congress are typically in their district offices when Congress is adjourned or on recess. For a schedule of the House and Senate official business and recess calendars, go to http://www.house.gov/house/2005_House_Calendar.shtml and http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/two_column_table/2006_Schedule.htm, respectively. In addition to meeting in Washington or the district office, surgeons should consider inviting legislators to visit their offices or hospi-

“Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves, therefore, are its only safe depositories.”

—Thomas Jefferson²

tals, so they can see exactly how the health care policies affect their constituents.

Regardless of where the meeting is scheduled to take place, circumstances may arise that prevent legislators from attending, in which case they will send a staff member. Never underestimate the power of staff. Because members of Congress cannot know about and monitor every issue, they employ very bright young staff members to provide input on specific subjects. These staff members are the first step in getting what you want. Staff is responsible for knowing the ins and outs of every issue—how the member has voted in the past, what other constituents are saying, the position of the party's leadership, which groups and individuals support or oppose, and, ultimately, how the legislator should vote to best serve the people who elected him or her. If a lobbyist can't convince staff to see his side of an issue, then the legislator will never hear about it.

Communicating

It is essential to effectively communicate with members of Congress and their staffs. Following is a list of what to do and what not to do in advocacy:

- Do keep your message simple
- Do explain your position in your own words
- Do explain how the issue affects you, your profession, your patients, and the people in the district

- Do request a response
- Don't engage in partisan politics
- Don't be self-righteous
- Don't use too much jargon or be too wordy when making your request
 - Don't forget to send a thank-you note immediately after your meeting
 - In this note, remind your legislator about your conversation and how he or she agreed to help you
 - Don't make promises you can't keep
 - Don't be afraid to acknowledge if you don't know the answer to a question—admit that you are not sure but will find out the answer and get back in touch

Constituents now have many more methods of communicating with their legislators. Traditionally, the most accepted form of communication has been the handwritten or typed letter. These days, it's a stroke of luck if that letter reaches a member of Congress in six weeks. Since the events of September 11 and the subsequent anthrax mailings, all mail sent to Capitol Hill goes through several security checks, including irradiation, before reaching a legislator's office.

On the other hand, e-mail allows constituents to reach their congresspeople immediately, which is very important when the pace of the congressional schedule picks up speed and timing is crucial. In an effort to help Fellows reach their legislators easily, the College developed the Legislative Action Center (LAC), a tool that provides surgeons with a "one-click" option to send e-mail to the Hill on issues that are important to the College and its members. To register on the LAC Web site, go to <http://www.capitolconnect.com/acspa/>. Registration only requires approximately five minutes.

The LAC provides background information and prewritten letters on the health care issues that are currently being debated on Capitol Hill. These letters are editable so that surgeons may provide their own perspectives on how the issue affects them and their patients. Stories from home put a face on policy, giving legislators real-life examples of how their actions have an impact on the people they represent. In addition, the lobbyists in the Washington Office get copies of these letters and use them to make sure that the legislators respond to their constituents.

Most importantly, when the College asks for Fel-

lows' help, it is because the organization has deep concerns about the potential effects of a bill on surgical practice and patient care. Twice last year, in November and December, the College sent out an electronic "Action Alert" asking that members contact their federal legislators via the LAC to prevent further cuts in Medicare physician payments. Although 21,000 Fellows received this message, only 648 sent a letter to their elected officials. With this low response rate in mind, remember the words of Will Rogers: "Even if you are on the right track, you will get run over if you just sit there."³

Keep in touch

It is impossible to overstate the importance of surgeons becoming involved in the legislative process at the federal level. As new health care issues emerge and old ones evolve on Capitol Hill, legislators need your input and expertise. The College's government affairs staff is always willing to assist surgeons who want to be part of the legislative process. By serving as trusted resources for their members of Congress, surgeons are better able to advocate on behalf of the profession and surgical patients. Surgeons who already have close relationships with legislators are encouraged to share this information with College staff.

The Washington Office is working to develop congressional advocacy teams. By establishing a database of surgeons who are willing to write letters, make phone calls, or schedule a visit with their legislators, the College can establish much better access to members of Congress. If you want to help with your federal legislators in Washington, please contact Adrienne Roberts at aroberts@facs.org. If you can help with your state legislators, please contact Melinda Baker at mbaker@facs.org. ^Q

References

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