

Creating relationships

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

One of the most important tools in a surgeon's "advocacy toolbox" is the relationships he or she creates—with elected officials or agency staff, peers and other physician advocates, or other not-for-profit organizations. It is important to have these relationships in place before you need to lobby an issue, as it is much easier to work with someone who is familiar with your organization rather than having to explain who you are, what you do, and why they should listen to you.

American College of Surgeons

One of the most important relationships for any surgeon advocate should be with the College's Division of Advocacy and Health Policy. The State Affairs team is available to help with various aspects of state grassroots advocacy, and the Legislative Affairs team provides the same assistance for issues in Congress.

Other associations

Working with other state and national specialty societies and local state health organizations is a good way to combine strengths and reach more people. Attending their events and inviting their members to your events helps to create solid working relationships. These organizations are more likely to be allies on surgical issues and it will pay off in the long run if these relationships are established early.

Doctor for a Day

An effective way of starting relationships with a state legislature is through the Doctor for a Day program: each day the legislature is in session, a member agrees to be the doctor for the legislature and staff of the Capitol. Many times, they are introduced on the chamber floor by a legislator and have an opportunity to observe the legislative process from the inside out.

Many chapters or state medical associations already have this program in place and are looking for volunteers. Certainly, if your state

doesn't have this type of program, it would be an opportunity for the chapter to sponsor one. Some states divide up the months, with each specialty society providing volunteers for their designated months.

Lobby days or a day at the state capital

State lobby days may add some excitement to an annual meeting and provide an opportunity to advocate on behalf of surgical issues. Even if there are no specific issues to lobby for, it is recommended to have some kind of set event to continue building those important relationships. As a state senator from Illinois once said, "It's nice to see someone who's not asking for anything."

Health fairs

Many elected officials host various informational "fairs" in their communities. "Senior Health" and "Back to School" fairs are especially popular. Legislators are always looking for participants, and chapters or local surgical groups offering to host a table create considerable good will with a short commitment of only a couple of volunteers. Local chambers of commerce or towns/cities have similar fairs or events, and it's likely your state senator or representative will also have a table there.

In addition, state legislatures may host their own health fairs for elected officials and their staff. These gatherings are usually held in the Capitol building itself and participants offer free screening and informational tables. While you may not be talking about legislative issues at these fairs, you will be putting a face to your organization, and that is an important first step in being a successful advocate. □