

Grassroots, grasstops, and... Astroturf?

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

The term “grassroots” has been used a lot during the recent debate over health care reform, but what defines a grassroots movement?

A traditional grassroots movement is a movement started by a concerned group of individuals to promote an idea or cause. These activities are not limited to influencing legislators—media outlets (for example, newspapers and television news stations) are now often the target of these types of “informational campaigns.” These informational campaigns may include organizing voter registration drives, hosting house meetings, putting up posters, even knocking on doors—all traditional grassroots activities.

In recent years, grassroots initiatives have started to include advocacy groups (such as the American College of Surgeons), especially when they encourage their membership to call or write legislators regarding a certain piece of legislation. Many companies and associations have formal grassroots programs, designed to encourage direct participation in the political process, but many question if that is, in fact, “true” grassroots. Doug Pinkham, president of the Public Affairs Council, addressed this issue in a post on the Council’s Web site last September, by stating the following:

Those in the “spontaneous” camp need to remember that every grassroots campaign has its organizers. The spark may be one savvy person (like Jody Williams of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines) or a group able to motivate a large number of followers (like AARP

on the health care issue). Grassroots campaigns, when conducted ethically, help democracy because they allow large groups of people—on all sides of the issue—to be heard.*

Astroturf

In the last year, a new term has come to define fake or exaggerated grassroots campaigns—“Astroturf.” In a well-published case, a consulting firm that specialized in grassroots was accused of writing fake letters to members of Congress urging them to vote against a piece of legislation. Much has been made of this issue in the news, and certainly blatant cases of unethical behavior such as this exist—but where do we draw the line? When an organization uses their resources to facilitate contact between the public and a legislature, is that true grassroots, or Astroturf?

Author and *New York Times* op-ed contributor Ryan Sager sums up this debate perfectly in the following quote:

Here’s a rule: Organizing isn’t cheating. Doing everything in your power to get your people to show up is basic politics. If they believe what they’re saying, no matter who helped organize them, they’re citizens and activists. The language at the town halls may get ugly and rough. But it’s not Astroturf.†

Grasstops

Just as cultivating the grassroots has become an important advocacy strategy, so, too, is having an “executive buy-in.” The term “grasstops” has come to define the strengthening of relationships between higher-level executives and policymakers. The term may also be used to refer to individuals who have a personal connection with the policymaker; identifying these individuals is key to a strong public policy campaign and can also be the next logical step for

*Pinkham, D. Getting to the root of Astroturf. Public Affairs Perspective. September 2, 2009. Available at: <http://pac.org/blog/getting-root-astroturf>. Accessed March 30, 2010.

†Sager, R. Keep off the Astroturf. *New York Times*. August 18, 2009. Opinion section. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/19/opinion/19sager.html>. Accessed April 15, 2010.

traditional grassroots advocates. It is important to note that while grassroots is a broad-based approach, grasstops are used for more specific targets and goals.

Getting involved

The College has two grassroots programs designed to help Fellows become more involved in their state legislatures and at the federal level. The State Advocacy Representative (StAR) program is an opportunity for all members of the College to become involved in state affairs. By participating in the StAR program, surgeons have the opportunity to act as the “eyes and ears” of the College at the state level. StARs pay attention to current legislation and inform the State Affairs team at the College what is happening in their region. StARs may be recruited to take action on an issue at the grassroots level, or to provide testimony at a state legislative committee hearing. StARs are also invited to participate in conference calls throughout the year, to share what they know with their colleagues and College staff.

For those interested in participating in the StAR program, contact Alexis Walters, Regional State Affairs Associate, 312-202-5446, awalters@facs.org.

In Congress

The ACS Federal “Grassroots Network” provides members an opportunity to get actively and personally involved in surgery’s federal advocacy efforts. All Fellows are strongly encouraged to join. As a Grassroots Network member, Fellows will receive regular legislative updates, calls to action, and other pertinent advocacy information. Where the interest and circumstances exist, members of the Grassroots Network will be empowered to meet with members of Congress back in their home states, deliver American College of Surgeons Professional Association-Surgeons Political Action Committee (ACSPA-SurgeonsPAC) checks, and represent the College at various legislative and political functions. Grassroots Network members are encouraged to cultivate personal relationships with both senators and representatives as a further means to advance the legislative goals of the College.

Visit <http://www.capitolconnect.com/acspa/> and follow the link to join the ACS Grassroots Network, or for more information contact Sara Morse, Manager of Political Affairs, at 202-672-1512 or smorse@facs.org. 