

Advancing advocacy with a day at the capitol

by Jon H. Sutton, Manager, State Affairs, Division of Advocacy and Health Policy

A very important part of any broad advocacy agenda involves face-to-face interaction with elected officials. Every year, representatives from thousands of organizations descend on Washington, DC, and state capitols to lobby an issue, to thank legislators for their support of a policy relevant to their profession, or to protest adoption of laws seen as detrimental to their cause.

Many medical and surgical associations sponsor annual lobby days to present the physician perspective on an issue. State medical societies commonly plan at least one lobby day per year, and sometimes they are joined by state specialty societies on this day. These efforts may be focused on one particular issue, such as opposing a physician tax on gross receipts, or on multiple significant issues that legislators are asked to address throughout a legislative session. In some cases, a state specialty society may have a particularly pressing issue to address. While a lobby day focused on one issue by a smaller society is more limited in scope and in number of physicians available to participate, it is no less necessary and effective in getting across the message. And in the case of the American College of Surgeons' Joint Surgical Advocacy Conference (JSAC) or the American Medical Association's National Advocacy Conference, hundreds of surgeons and other physicians travel to Washington, DC, for several days of issue briefings, advocacy training, and visits to Capitol Hill.

Sponsored by the College and 20 other national surgical societies, JSAC 2010, as it is informally referred to, commenced at the end of last month. This three-day conference provided an intensive introduction to the legislative process, as well as beginner and advanced advocacy training seminars, equipping surgeons with the skills and tools necessary to effect change both during their time in Washington, DC, and throughout the year at home. During visits to the Hill, surgeons were

given the opportunity to engage in practical application of their newly learned skills while meeting with their members of Congress. (A future issue of the *Bulletin* will contain a more comprehensive review of the JSAC.)

Planning the event

There are many components that go into planning a lobby day at the capitol, and the more work done upfront, the more effective the event will be, not only from the perspective of participants, but from those legislators being visited. No one likes to attend a disorganized event, so consider the following tips when organizing a lobby day.

- *Date of event.* The event should not conflict with other physician lobby days or large national clinical conferences; coordination among physician groups is essential in delivering a consistent physician message (it may make more sense to join with a coalition of physician groups for one big lobby day). Find a date on the calendar when the legislature is in session, and that falls before legislative deadlines. Also, consider a date that will allow for legislator education on the issue or issues—there is little point to having a lobby day when the legislature is not in session and legislators are not around.

- *Agenda.* Smaller lobby days may last for less than one full day, with participants meeting for breakfast and an issues briefing, picking up their information packets and “leave behinds” (handouts to leave with the legislators), and then spending the rest of the morning visiting with respective legislators. Following legislative visits, a lunch and debriefing can finish up by mid-afternoon, with everyone heading back to their hometowns soon after that. For a larger lobby day, it may be necessary to spend the morning in briefing sessions, with legislative visits following lunch, and then re-grouping later in the afternoon for a debriefing, and a reception in the early evening with legislators and legislative staff.

- *Issue focus.* Many lobby days focus on one or two specific issues, which emphasize the importance of these topics with legislators and reduce the complexity of conversations with legislators—simplicity is a virtue, especially when numerous nonphysician organizations are probably running around the capitol on the same day with their own agendas. A great visual cue for legislators occurs when physicians wear their lab coats, reinforcing the image of medical expertise when discussing the issue, and helping surgeons to stand out in the crowd.

- *Budget.* Sponsoring a lobby day at the capitol can be expensive, especially for smaller organizations with limited resources. Spreading the cost among coalition partners is a great way to plan a larger event and can include things such as food (meals, receptions), transportation (buses for participants or letting them drive in by themselves), setting up appointments with legislators, and media and public relations (brochures/programs, handouts, and issue fact sheets).

This is, of course, a very broad view of the factors that go into a lobby day at the capitol. It is not possible to go into all the specific details here; suffice it to say that ACS State Affairs staff members look forward to working with surgeons and College chapters to plan and implement a lobby day at the capitol. ACS Federal Legislative staff members are also available to assist chapters in facilitating Capitol Hill visits throughout the year. Contact Sara Morse, Manager of ACS Professional Association-SurgeonsPAC, in the ACS Washington, DC, Office at 202-337-2701 or smorse@facs.org for further information.

Chapter advocacy grant program

As a reflection of continuing support of the College for chapter advocacy efforts in their respective states, the Board of Governors Committee on Chapter Activities (GCCA) considered a proposal in October 2009 requesting the development and implementation of a chapter advocacy grant program to help support a lobby day at the capitol. This proposal was supported and signed by 27 ACS chapters, and was unanimously accepted by the Board of Governors. The Board of Regents approved this program in February 2010

Under this two-year Day at the Capitol grant program, ACS chapters may apply annually for

a grant for up to \$5,000 in a given year, with the stipulation that they will match one dollar for every two received. For example, a grant of \$5,000 would require a chapter match of \$2,500, for a total of \$7,500. After completing a grant application, the GCCA Subcommittee on Advocacy will review the applications and select the grant recipients. These recipients will be assigned a member of the State Affairs team to assist with the planning and on-site implementation of the event.

In those states where more than one ACS chapter exists, it is recommended that all the chapters come together in support of the grant application. Statewide advocacy requires a united surgical voice, which is best developed when diverse chapters are working together.

Once the Day at the Capitol program is completed, chapters will be required to provide a report to the ACS State Affairs office describing the event and its accomplishments, detailing ways in which the grant funds were spent, and assessing the overall completion of goals and objectives of the program. This report will be shared with the GCCA Subcommittee on Advocacy to further assess the grant program.

For further information on the Chapter Advocacy Grant Program, contact Jon Sutton, Manager of State Affairs in the Division of Advocacy and Health Policy, at jsutton@facs.org, or visit the College's state legislative Web page at <http://www.facs.org/ahp/statelegislation.html>. 