
Midwest surgeon leaders engage in advocacy development at conference

by Alexis Walters, Regional State Affairs Associate, Division of Advocacy and Health Policy

The American College of Surgeons held the inaugural Midwest Regional State Advocacy Conference in April, at the College's office in Chicago, IL. The meeting provided more than 20 chapter leaders, governors, administrators, and executive directors from seven chapters (including Illinois, Metro Chicago, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio) the opportunity to network, learn how to structure their chapter to maximize advocacy efforts, explore innovative ways to motivate chapter members, identify best practices for communicating with legislators, and consider programs on building effective legislative messages and coalitions.

The conference was held as a part of the College's ongoing effort to enhance and support chapter advocacy in the Midwestern states. Alexis Walters, the Regional State Affairs Associate (and also the author of this article) was hired last September to work primarily with the chapters in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The goal of this position is to assist with the many varied aspects of state advocacy, including tracking and monitoring legislation, creating action alerts on proposed legislation to encourage Fellows to contact their legislators or take some



Attendees at the Midwest Regional State Advocacy Conference brainstorm on ways to successfully build a coalition. Left to right: Deborah Loeff, MD, FACS, Metro Chicago; Kenneth Printen, MD, FACS, Illinois; Verne Hoshal, MD, FACS, Michigan; and Ms. Walters.

other type of action, providing advocacy presentations at annual meetings or other appropriate venues, working directly with chapter councils to develop an advocacy infrastructure to support chapter advocacy initiatives, assisting with the planning of lobby days or other advocacy conferences, and preparing testimony for state legislative hearings.

Program highlights

Throughout the day-and-a-half conference, various topics were covered by a wide array of speakers. These presenters—who included College staff

members, chapter Executive Directors, surgeon advocacy leaders, and staff members from the Illinois State Medical Society and the American Medical Association—represented a number of content perspectives.

At the beginning of the meeting, College staff members were available to provide attendees with an overview of the numerous College resources available to Fellows, such as the Surgery State Legislative Action Center (SSLAC) and the Advocacy page of the College's Web portal. The SSLAC is a Web site used by ACS staff and Fellows

to assist with grassroots advocacy efforts. Fellows can utilize the SSLAC to access state and federal representatives, contact legislators, track elections, and contact members of the media. The Web portal features a summary of the 400 pieces of legislation the College has been tracking throughout the 2010 legislative session, along with various other tools, including the opportunity for Fellows to network on advocacy via the advocacy message board.

Attendees were introduced to numerous state advocacy programs that can easily be implemented by the chapters. Kathy Browning, Executive Director of the Georgia Society of the American College of Surgeons; Brad Feldman, Executive Director of the Ohio Chapter; and Melinda Baker, ACS Senior State Affairs Associate, all discussed advocacy programs that could be instituted at the state level. These programs included state lobby days, “Doctor for the Day” programs, community health fairs, political action committee fundraisers (within state legal guidelines), and advocacy newsletters to establish regular communication with chapter members. Ms. Browning stressed that chapters can “start out small, but please start!”

Of particular interest for attendees was the question-and-answer session with Illinois State Sen. Kwame Raoul. Senator Raoul spoke about the importance of visiting with state and federal legislators in-district, as well as at the State house level.

“Anyone who thinks that

legislators sit in their office and think of solutions—that’s bunk! I get to hear from people that have problems and have solutions,” Senator Raoul stated, when addressing the importance of meeting with legislators. Senator Raoul also placed an emphasis on the value of hearing personal stories from constituents, and provided several examples of how a personal story from a constituent had directly impacted the passage of legislation in the Illinois Senate.

After Senator Raoul covered effective methods to communicate with legislators, Ms. Browning spoke to the group regarding how to prepare an effective message to send to a legislator. During her presentation, Ms. Browning outlined five steps for developing a message, including:

- Identifying a target audience
- Identifying what will move the target audience
- Presenting your solution
- Presenting results of your position
- Explaining what makes you different from the “other side”

Philip Corvo, MD, FACS, an Alternate Governor for the Connecticut Chapter, closed out the conference by presenting ways to motivate chapter members. His presentation included a handout titled “Checklist for a Successful Chapter,” which included having a dedicated council with a common goal, collaboration with specialty societies, the formation of both a Membership Recruitment Committee and a Young Surgeons

Committee, and a reminder to always have fun with your chapter members.

At the conclusion of the program, attendees were tasked with a challenge: pass along the importance of advocacy to at least one Fellow. Subinoy Das, MD, FACS, of the Ohio Chapter, accepted the challenge and added, “I was impressed with the quality and organization of the staff of the ACS and their devotion to protecting the welfare of our patients who need surgery. This conference has inspired me to increase my participation in supporting our state legislators on issues vital to the practice of surgery, and has given me many valuable tools to effectively and efficiently advocate for my patients.”

While the Midwest Regional State Advocacy Conference was focused on a geographically defined group of individuals, the advocacy development information covered during the conference is universal in application. All surgeons can benefit from a basic knowledge of advocacy, and by supporting their respective chapter advocacy activities.

For more information on the topics discussed in this article, including copies of handouts or presentations, contact Alexis Walters, Regional State Affairs Associate, at awalters@facs.org or 312-202-5446.