

“How To” Tips on Building Relationships with Legislators

One of the most important elements of grassroots advocacy is building and enhancing personal relationships with those who make decisions. In order to successfully accomplish goals, family physicians need to have good solid working relationships with their state legislators. Term limits and the resulting perpetual influx of new legislators into the system have intensified the need for these relationships and make the continuous cultivation of these relationships imperative.

Following are some ideas for building good relationships with new legislators:

- Plan to attend the OAFP Robert S. Young, M.D. Legislative Conference which is held every two years in May (odd-numbered years). Learn about state issues during the afternoon sessions and then make plans to meet your legislator at the reception that follows.
- Become politically active in your local community. Get involved in a state representative’s campaign by volunteering or by making a political contribution to a specific campaign or to the Family Medicine Political Action Committee. Volunteering isn’t limited to stuffing envelopes and door-to-door canvassing. You might volunteer by offering to brief a candidate on health care issues. Invite and escort a candidate to a local chapter or hospital meeting and ask them to speak.
- Be a source of information for a new legislator or candidate who is not particularly well acquainted with health issues. You are well equipped to provide specific examples of how patients and physicians are affected (both positively and negatively) by legislative action.
- Clip articles about local health care issues, highlight key points and send them to the candidate with your thoughts. The goal is to have the legislator or legislative candidate recognize your name, see you as a thoughtful community leader with expertise in the field of health care. In the future when a legislator has a question and needs input on a health issue, he or she will think of you to call for your comments and advice.
- Attend some local fundraisers and debates and ask questions. All are ways to build visibility with legislators and legislators-to-be. One of the most important elements of grassroots advocacy is building and enhancing personal relationships with those who make decisions.
- Build good, solid working relationships with legislative staff. Staff has always been a valuable resource but because of the impact of term limits, staff has become even more critically important. There will be more continuity and experience in staff members than there will be in legislators. Staff is responsible for setting agendas, conveying messages and orchestrating the legislative calendar. They often do most, if

not all, research concerning current bills and issues. They are good people to have on your side.

Without question, term limits have resulted in legislators with less expertise and experience in legislative matters. Rather than seeing this occurrence as a threat, family physicians need to seize the opportunity that is presented by term limits.

Start today by working to develop and enhance relationships with the legislators from your area.