

# Advocacy—Up Close and Personal

## Face-to-Face Meetings with Legislators

**P**AS OFTEN ASK ME, what's the best way to engage legislators, to get the biggest “bang for your advocacy buck”? While all advocacy is good advocacy, and we value every PA's involvement to the extent possible in the life of a busy PA, there is one advocacy method that stands out above the others in getting the PA profession's message across: the face-to-face meeting with legislators and staff.

**Personal meetings are effective.** A January 2011 survey by the Congressional Management Foundation revealed that contrary to popular (and somewhat cynical) opinion, the biggest influence on a member of Congress is not the almighty dollar or the stereotypical DC power lobbyist. Overwhelmingly, legislators and staff responded that an in-person visit from a constituent is the best way to influence a member of Congress, especially one who may be on the fence on an issue or has not already made up his or her mind.

**In-person meetings cut through the noise.** Today's congressional offices are receiving between 200 and 800 percent more messages

than they were 10 years ago from constituents alone, and that doesn't include missives from colleagues, the media, party officials, lobbyists, interest groups and more. All those letters and emails need answering—by congressional office staff whose numbers have not increased since the 1970s. That's not to say that written communications and phone calls are not effective means of advocating. On the contrary, we say quality and quantity together make a successful grassroots strategy. They're just counted differently. Written communications are measured by their volume; in-person meetings are measured by the relationships they build.

**Personal meetings put a face on the profession and the issue.** Many times I have taken a PA to the Hill to meet with legislators and have witnessed the amazing power of the personal story. Stories that PAs recount from their practice and their patients can underscore the importance of an issue in ways that a policy briefing or fact sheet could never do. These examples are told with passion, with empathy, and with emotion, and they leave the staffer with a real understanding of the issues PAs and patients face every day. PAs have such a powerful story to tell, and it's up to you to tell it. Says Diane Daw, New Jersey PA and AAPA CORE advocacy boot camp participant: “Who better to represent us than us?”

**In-person meetings show that you care and that they should care too.** Iowa PA Ed Friedman says, “A face-to-face meeting tells a legislator that the issue is important enough for you to take the time to see them about it.” He's exactly right. Members of Congress and staff want to know how the subject affects their district, their constituents. An in-person conversation carries the impact further. By taking the time out from your busy schedule to attend a meeting, you're showing the legislator just how much an issue matters to you and your patients.

**No prior experience needed.** Many PAs are intimidated by the notion of taking part in an in-person meeting, fearing they don't know enough to meet with Hill staff or that the legislator will try to trip them up with tough questions. Not so! PAs bring something to the table that legislators and staff don't have: perspective from the profession. The best expertise PAs can share during meetings is their own: talking about themselves, their practice, their profession. In relating how she quells her occasional nervousness, Kansas PA Loretta Hoerman says, “I remind myself that I am the sole PA expert in the room.”

**Meetings can take place where you are.** The experience of going to Capitol Hill and walking the halls of Congress can't be beat. But sessions with legislators can be just as effective if they are held back home in the district. During a district meeting, a Utah representative once praised Bob



PA Katie Lawson meets with Georgia congressional delegation staff in Washington, D.C.



U.S. Sen. Olympia Snowe meets with members of the Down East Association of Physician Assistants during AAPA's CORE.

**Get up close and personal with your legislators.** AAPA President Robert Wooten, PA-C, has challenged all PAs to meet face to face with their legislators. AAPA has created a tool kit, available on [www.aapa.org](http://www.aapa.org), to help PAs set up and conduct meetings in the district and in Washington. Or, even better, register to come to **AAPA's Capitol Connection 2012: PAs on the Hill event, March 25-27**. The biannual conference will empower and enable all PAs—from novice to seasoned advocate—to speak for the profession in the halls of Congress. Go to [www.aapa.org/capitolconnection/](http://www.aapa.org/capitolconnection/) to learn more and to register. **PA**

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Bunnell, PA-C, for “establishing relationships with state and national lawmakers before legislative emergencies arise.” He encouraged Bob and his PA colleagues to continue to call on his staff often, saying, “You don’t have to go to Washing-

ton to meet with us. We are here!” And being away from the busy Capitol Hill environment means that legislators and staff have significantly more time to devote to a meeting and to focus on the message.

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