

Tips on Effective Advocacy

Like it or not, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease!" With all of the other constituents and issues facing legislators today, don't expect to have your perspective represented if you don't make the effort to communicate your views.

Remember the old adage, "There is strength in numbers?" It's not only true in life, but politics as well! While you as an individual can work with legislators for the best interests of your patients, the best chance of accomplishing your goals is to work with the AAN by establishing your priorities and advocating for them together. Involving other colleagues and patients from your district also adds to the strength of your message.

Know your legislators

Knowing legislators and staff personally is the first step to having your voice heard. If you haven't met them, set up a meeting and introduce yourself. This is especially important if the lawmaker is new. Welcome them to your district; now is the time to educate them and they'll remember your courtesy. Establish a friendly relationship by finding common friends or interests, especially if the legislator has any connection to your schools, children, spouses, etc. Don't miss the chance to visit with your legislators in the district at town hall meetings or other events. Legislative schedules can be tricky, so make an appointment if you can, and make sure to develop contacts with the legislators' staff, also.

Don't wait until an important bill is in your legislator's committee or on the floor to develop these contacts. Start early — before you need them to be on your side!

Be a source of reliable information

Specific knowledge about your district is essential if you are to be of any assistance to your legislators. The information you provide must be:

- **Understandable** -- Remember that your legislator does not have the same background in medicine that you do.
- **Accurate** -- It's ok not to know the answer to a question, simply say you will find out and always follow through.
- **Persuasive** -- Always break your proposals down to how they will positively affect patients. The bottom line is that legislators need to be convinced that your issues matter.

The goal is to build credibility with your legislators so that they come looking for you when they need information. Give legislators your address, phone numbers at home and work and a fax number. Often when legislators need information, time is of the essence. Don't be afraid to turn to AAN staff for help if you don't know the answers to every question a legislator asks. If you inadvertently offer erroneous information, always contact your legislator and explain the mistake as quickly as possible.

Make your legislators knowledgeable about neurology

Give legislators and legislative staff tours of your clinic and/or hospital often, at least on an annual basis. Invite them to speak at local medical society meetings and/or service club meetings. They won't be able to attend every function, but the more time they spend with you, your colleagues and the patients, the more likely they are to support your cause.

Timing is everything -- know the process

You need to know when to strike -- when lawmakers are voting in committee or when you need their vote on the floor. Knowing the process makes it easier for you to target your contacts and make your voice heard.

Ask how they will vote -- and hold them accountable

All of your hard work goes for nothing if you don't follow through when the final votes are counted. In your contacts with legislators, be sure to ask how they intend to vote on specific issues. If they do not intend to vote your way, continue to build your relationship and share information that may sway their opinion or be willing to compromise rather than lose the issue completely. If you can't, don't worry, there is always a next time. This week's opposition is inevitably next week's ally.

While legislators are interested in doing the right thing, they also realize it doesn't do them any good if no one notices. When legislators support your position, give them credit. Send them letters of thanks and share them with the editor of your local newspaper, comment on their support publicly in board meetings and call or stop by to visit them personally. You would hate for them to feel unappreciated the next time you asked for their help.