

Building Relationships

WITH LEGISLATORS

Nobody

does it better

than . . .

YOU



Illinois Hospital Association

It's easier than you think.

Legislators need you as much as you need them.

They want to make sensible health policy. They also want to reflect their constituents' views. Elected officials need support, public attention, and information they can use. They need reasons to care about important issues. Once you've established a relationship with them, it's easy to give them those reasons.

You know the needs of your hospital and patients. You understand the issues. You are a community leader and major employer. You are proud of your hospital's service to the community. You vote for the elected officials who make the public policy decisions.

Why should you make staying involved with elected officials throughout the year an important part of your job?

Because nobody does it better.



Questions & Answers

Q: How can I influence legislation? Isn't that what paid lobbyists and associations are for?

A: The first rule of politics is, "Don't forget who elected you." Lobbyists and associations don't elect officials, constituents do. And hospital leaders represent an important constituency. The professionals play an important role, but the people who work at hospitals, those who serve as board members or volunteers, and the patients who go to your hospital – they're the ones who play the most important role of all. As every legislator knows, the best "lobbyists" are the citizens who work and live and vote in their legislative districts.

Questions & Answers

Q: Why would legislators care about my opinions?

A: Because the only way they get elected and stay in office is to listen to what the people back home are saying. And because health care issues reach deep and wide among voters and you have valuable information about those issues.

Most lawmakers are generalists. They don't have time to research the pros and cons of every piece of legislation, so they need information from those who would be affected by it. You know and care more about hospital issues than your legislators, who have many easier areas to focus their attention on. Who better for them to listen to than those who work in the field?

Q: Can keeping in touch with my legislators really bring concrete benefits to my hospital?

A: Yes – we've learned that over and over again. Hospitals that build relationships with lawmakers today are more likely to get sound public policy and fair government funding down the road. Get legislators familiar with your hospital, get them on your side of the issues, tell them what you want, need, and expect – and you're likely to get it. When crucial legislation is being considered, a familiar face has more clout than a strange one.

Examples: When the Illinois Attorney General pushed to have introduced HB4999 (billing and collections) and HB5000 (charity care mandates) the Illinois hospital community spoke with a united voice to their representatives and senators about how devastating each bill would be as introduced. As a result of this grassroots advocacy, IHA was able to sit down in good faith discussions and modify HB4999 to be workable for hospitals and fair to patients. The Attorney General agreed not to pursue HB5000 in the Spring 2006 but to hold discussions with the IHA. Continued grassroots advocacy will surely be a key component as we continue to work on this issue.

Grassroots efforts to ensure that federal lawmakers know how budget cuts will impact health care delivery at home always matters – and sharing this information has helped the hospital community hold its ground time and again during budget cutting frenzies.

Questions & Answers

Responding to the hospitals' warnings that weakening federal programs will compromise health care services for millions of people, Congress has rejected adopting billions of dollars in Medicare and Medicaid reductions proposed in administration budgets. In addition, many legislators have actively opposed administration efforts to circumvent Congress and cut Medicaid administratively.

Q: I'm already too busy just running my organization. How can I make a difference when my time is so limited?

A: You don't have to do it by yourself. Get your board, your volunteers, and your employees involved, and they'll do a lot of the work for you. IHA created a step by step guide to assist you in planning a "Mini-Residency Program for Legislators." This guide is an all inclusive toolkit and is available on our website at www.ihatoday.org. Your Association can be a big help, too.

Example: Here's a simple idea for connecting with elected officials that takes little effort: include them in events you are already organizing for your staff and volunteers. This gives your legislators an opportunity to join in thanking hospital workers for their work on behalf of the community, while strengthening ties with the legislators at the same time.

Q: How can IHA help me?

A: We'll keep you updated on the key issues. We can give you facts about your legislators, such as the committees they serve on, their areas of legislative expertise, and their record on health care issues. We'll help organize visits to Washington and Springfield to meet with your representatives. We'll give you talking points and help you make the contacts, but it's up to you to maintain the relationship and follow up quickly when action is needed.

Be sure to check our Web site at www.ihatoday.org for updates on legislative issues. And please let us know how your hospital is building relationships with legislators, so we can recognize your activities in our publications.



Tips & Techniques

Know your legislators.

Get to know your legislators socially before you begin bringing up a political agenda. Find out about their areas of interest and past involvement with health care issues. Invite them to your hospital and other facilities for tours and special events such as dedications and annual banquets. Give them the VIP treatment and make them feel part of your hospital family. Often constituents call legislators for the first time when they want something. "Vote yes." "Vote no." "Help me with a problem." If you keep in touch informally all year round, you'll get their attention when you need to ask them for support on a specific issue.

Tell them what you're doing for the community. Keep elected and appointed officials updated on your activities and role in the community. Ask them if they would like to be on your mailing list, and send them your annual report and newsletter. Let them know how many employees you have, how many patients you care for, and where they live. Keep reinforcing your hospital's value to the community by providing information on your range of services, the uncompensated care you provide, and your health education and social services programs. Facts and figures can be useful, but also emphasize the human factor, with examples of your hospital's positive impact on people's lives.

Vote.

If you register and vote, elected officials know there is a good chance you voted for them. They know they have to rely on you in future elections. It's perfectly appropriate – and it can help your cause – to tell an elected official that you voted for him or her.

Tips & Techniques

Know the issues.

Your expertise is one of your most valuable assets. Get familiar with the health-care-related issues legislators are dealing with, and be prepared to give specific examples of how those issues affect the health of constituents. Be aware of problems affecting your hospital and community that elected and appointed officials can help solve.

Share your knowledge.

Become a credible source of information on hospital and health care issues. Show legislators how federal and state health care dollars are spent in your facility. Educate them about the importance of an appropriately funded Medicaid/Medicare system. Let them know about the challenges you face as you continue to provide high quality health care to your patients despite inadequate government payment. And, with the anticipated barrage of hostile legislation (charity care mandates, tax-exempt status challenges or untenable nurse-to-patient ratios) now is the time connect or re-connect with legislators and educate them about the good work you and your staff do to serve the needs of your entire community, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Example: With legislative activity anticipated to continue around charity care and community benefit, inform legislators how your hospital is responding to community health needs by creating special programs (that often lose money) such as substance abuse, behavioral health, AIDS services or clinics, as well as all the ways in which your hospital cares for the poor or those without insurance, despite the unpredictable and low payment from government payers. Also, with the continuing health care workforce shortage and the anticipation of the introduction of nurse ratio or other unhelpful (or counterproductive) workforce legislation, educate your legislator about how you are working with local schools to showcase and encourage students to enter the health care field or how you partner with local higher education institutions to increase opportunities for those students to see their dream of becoming a health care professional come to fruition. There are many ways in which your hospital serves your community. This is your chance to spotlight them.

Tips & Techniques

Example: Medicare and Medicaid continue to be at risk, and workforce issues, transparency, and challenges to the tax-exempt status of hospitals continue. Sharing with your members of Congress what your hospital does for your community and the people you serve 24 hours a day, 7 days a week is critical. This knowledge empowers legislators to stand up for their hospitals when challenged, and to fight for ways to make our health care system better. Continue to “arm” your legislators with facts, figures, and real-life examples of how the issues they are struggling with – and the decisions they make – will impact the health and well-being of the people you both serve – because “nobody does it better...”

Say “Thank You.”

Constituents say thank you all too rarely. There are many appropriate ways to thank a legislator – a personal letter to the legislator, a letter to the editor of the local paper, a public acknowledgement of the legislator’s support at a meeting at the hospital with your board, staff, or volunteers. If you can be a source of favorable publicity or simply provide opportunities for elected officials to be visible to the public in association with hospital community services, they will appreciate being identified with your hospital.

Ask for what you want.

State what you want from legislators clearly and directly. Ask them to sponsor legislation favorable to your cause or to defeat unfavorable legislation. If they know you and your hospital, they will be likely to support you and communicate their opinions to other legislators. If you don’t tell your elected officials what you think should be done, they will listen to someone else.

Support the good guys.

Supporting the campaigns of elected officials who care about hospitals is important. As a private citizen, you can support a candidate’s campaign in many different roles. For example, elected officials appreciate local support and the effort their constituents make to attend fundraising events. Inviting officials to your hospital for special events not only familiarizes them with your

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organization but also gives them a press opportunity and a chance to meet with constituents.

Participate in your PAC.

IHA PAC combines the benefits of individual participation with the strength of unified political action in the election campaign process. If your hospital participates in IHA PAC and also receives individual solicitations from the campaign committees of elected officials, you can ask IHA's Springfield office to route the Association's contribution through you, the legislator's constituent. Hospitals that participate in IHA PAC should feel comfortable asking staff how they can play a role in distributing contributions to their legislators.

Reminder: Although tax-exempt organizations can engage in a certain amount of lobbying activity, they cannot intervene in election campaigns – for example, by endorsing, supporting, or opposing candidates for office. For further information, check IHA's Web site (www.ihatoday.org) for a document entitled "Political Campaign Activity by Tax-Exempt Hospitals."

The people with real political power are those who elect people to office and then follow through by communicating their interests to those elected officials.

Legislators are going to make health policy. For the sake of our patients and the communities we serve, let's make sure they do it with us. Let's help them make health care part of their political agendas.

Illinois Hospital Association

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