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# PRACTICE PERFECT

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

## Physician Advocacy—Three Easy Ways to Build Relationships With Your Legislators

BY STEPHANIE D. VANCE, ADVOCACY CONSULTANT

**W**ant to lobby your legislators but don't know where to start? Based on my experience as a congressional aide and, later, a lobbyist, I recommend three steps that will go a long way to building a positive relationship with politicians.

### 1. Meet With the Legislator's Staff

Establishing a relationship with a legislator's D.C.- and district-based staff members can be a key first step in effective advocacy. They have more time to get to know you and your issues than their boss does. To some extent, they can also act as gatekeeper to the legislator.

**District-based staff.** District-based staff—also known as constituent service staff—are not generally policy oriented, but building a positive relationship with them can be very useful. For instance, when D.C.-based staff get e-mails from their district-based counterparts, they tend to answer those e-mails very quickly.

**D.C.-based staff.** Periodically, members of Congress will return to the dis-

trict they represent for a “district work period,” and they will occasionally bring some of their D.C.-based policy staff. This is a great time to connect with those staff members.

**What to expect.** Meetings with staff members will be much more low key than they would be with a legislator—especially when those meetings take place in the district.

If you meet with staff in D.C., you might be asked to meet in a hallway or in the cafeteria over a cup of coffee. This isn't a sign of disrespect; it is because they are simply short on space.

Most meetings in D.C. last about 15 minutes, so you'll need to plan your pitch well if you want to get all your main points across. Meetings in the district may last longer.

**How to set up a meeting with staff.** Arranging a meeting with district-based staff is usually easy: Just call and say you're a local ophthalmologist who would like to visit them; you can even invite them to come to your office or a health fair that you're attending. (To get their contact information, see “Online Resources” on the next page.)

**Relationship-building tip—Become a resource for staff.** Staff sometimes receive very detailed questions about health care from constituents. You can offer to help them with any queries about Medicare or health insurance. Tell them that if you can't answer it, you'll find someone who can.

### 2. Attend a Town Hall Meeting

During a congressional recess, many legislators return to the districts they represent to engage with their constituents. One way they do this is via town hall meetings.

**What to expect.** Town hall meetings are low key, and not a lot of people attend them, which makes it a good way to meet a legislator. If you plan to make comments, keep in mind that you have two audiences—the legislator and other constituents.

**How to find out about town hall meetings.** You can contact a legislator's staff to see when he or she will next have a town hall meeting. You also can follow legislators on social media—where many members post their plans for their next district work period—or go to their websites and sign up for their newsletters. Another option is to check the House and Senate websites to see when they are out of session, which will give you a sense of when town hall meetings might take place.

**How to prepare.** You should explain to the legislator how your work benefits his or her constituents. To this end, you should prepare some key talking points that:

- Define what an ophthalmologist is
- Mention any volunteer or charity service that you provide in the community
- Describe the challenges that your practice faces in providing care to



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underserved areas or individuals

- Detail the types of disease you treat (and the advancements that have been made in treating them)
- Explain how preventive care can save vision

**Relationship-building tip—Schedule some additional time.** You may have a better chance of speaking one-on-one with the legislator if you arrive early or stay late.

### 3. Invite Legislators and/or Their Staff to See You in Action

The most important thing you can do to build a relationship with legislators and their staff is to arrange a site visit to your practice—don't just tell them what you do, show them.

**What to expect.** If a legislator's staff members are visiting your practice, they might spend 60 to 90 minutes there, though the site visit might be shorter if a legislator is also attending.

**How to prepare.** At the outset, you should determine what message you are trying to convey, as this will impact some of your preparations.

- **Who to invite?** Will your invitation include the legislator or just staff? Will you invite more than one legislator?
- **How can you sell the invitation?** The invitation needs to be as compelling as possible. Suppose, for example, that your legislator is very active on education issues. In that case, highlight your pediatric services and discuss vision screening in schools.
- **Who can help deliver the message?** For instance, if you want to demonstrate how meaningful use regulations and the Physician Quality Reporting System are slowing down your practice, you might want your I.T. specialist to describe the complexities of your electronic health records and a biller or office manager to explain the administrative burden. And patients can be extremely persuasive—they can help your visitors understand that you're not just lobbying for yourself, you're trying to make things better for people that you and your legislator mutually serve.
- **What about logistics?** How will your visitors get to your office? Do

## Online Resources

**Visit the Academy's Advocacy Center.** Go to [www.ao.org/advocacy](http://www.ao.org/advocacy) and click "Get Involved" for a drop-down menu with options that include:

- **How to Host a Fundraiser**—arrange a fundraising event using this step-by-step guide.
- **I Am an Advocate**—learn from your colleagues' advocacy stories.
- **Become a Better Advocate**—get tips that will help you communicate with politicians more effectively.
- **Contact Your Legislator**—enter your ZIP code and you'll get a list of your federal and state legislators. Click on their names to get the contact information for both their D.C. and district offices, along with a list of committees that they are on, how they have voted on key bills, and whether or not they are cosponsoring legislation that the Academy is tracking.
- **Ways to Give**—help support the Surgical Scope Fund, OphthPAC, and your state society EyePAC.

**Learn about your state legislatures.** Visit [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org) for a wealth of information on your state legislative bodies, including the legislative session calendar. You also can contact your state ophthalmological society at [www.ao.org/statesocieties](http://www.ao.org/statesocieties).

they need information on parking?

- **How will you record the event?** Your visitors may have questions that you can't answer right away. You'll need to make sure you have a way of capturing those queries.
- **What about the media?** If you are considering inviting reporters, check with the legislator's office first.

**Relationship-building tip—Follow up.** Legislators and their staff won't be surprised if site visits are used to request their support on an issue; after all, constituents are constantly asking them for help—indeed, they get more requests than they have time to address. What's less common is for constituents to follow up on their requests. But if you are persistent in your follow-up—

which could include an e-mail, a phone call, or a request to meet face-to-face—the legislator's staff is likely to push your request up their priority list.

### Social Media: Is the Legislator Online?

Currently, few constituents are commenting on legislators' social media sites—and when they do, it is typically to register a complaint. This means that positive comments will be noticed.

It is therefore worth following a legislator on Facebook and Twitter and looking for opportunities to make positive, constructive comments. You can also use their social media postings to gather information on where they have been in your district, whom they meet, and what legislation they're supporting—all information that you can potentially use to make a connection with them.

Some legislators have even been conducting town hall meetings online, via Facebook or Twitter.

### Increase Your Impact

**Consider the legislator's perspective—Why does what you want matter to them?** If you're asking a legislator to support your issues, you should frame your message in a way that makes the request resonate. Will it help them move their legislative agenda forward? Will it help their constituents?

**Be informative.** Personal stories can have an impact—but back them up with local facts and figures that are relevant to the legislator.

**Invest some time, reap the rewards.** If you attend two town hall meetings each year—with each one taking a couple of hours—that would be a relatively small investment of time, but you will be remembered for it, which can pay dividends when you need to share your perspective with your legislator. ■

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*Ms. Vance is the author of five books, including Citizens in Action and The Influence Game. She also is a consultant at The Advocacy Associates ([www.advocacyassociates.com](http://www.advocacyassociates.com)). Financial disclosure: Employed by an advocacy communications firm.*