Washington Consult

Getting Involved: Advocating Locally for National Impact

You don't have to go to Washington and lobby on Capitol Hill to get legislators' attention on issues important to you and your patients. Sometimes, the people you need to talk to are right in your own back yard.

Creating and Maintaining Personal Relationships

Seven years of lobbying taught former House staffer Dave Dillahunt, CAE, how to connect with the influential. Oncologists and "[House of Representatives] Members may live in the same neighborhood, be members of Rotary Club or the local Chamber of Commerce, have kids that go to school together, and so on," says Dillahunt, now executive director of the Ohio/West Virginia Hematology Oncology Society. "Try to identify those relationships."

Physicians are often reluctant to advocate for reimbursement and issues that affect them, explains Mary Malloy, CAE, executive director of the Michigan Society of Hematology and Oncology (MSHO). However, she adds, "Oncologists will go to the mat for issues affecting patient care and access."

It's this spirit of devotion to the people they serve that's a common bond between oncologists and legislators. "Policy makers need some sort of frame of reference for what you're talking about and how it affects their constituents—the people they're advocating for," Malloy says. Oncologists are just the ones to provide that connection.

"It's amazing how many physicians have treated a senator's mother," she says, or who might live next door to a senior staffer. Developing relationships with your legislators doesn't have to mean asking them for things every time you make contact. Simply providing information that may be of interest to a representative is a great way to establish a new relationship or develop an existing one.

Becoming a resource for your legislators is one way to create a long-term, beneficial relationship. If your Member has a health advisory committee, volunteer to serve on it. Invite your legislator to visit your facility or practice to get a firsthand look at how oncologists are affecting the constituency. Attend town meetings held by your Congress Member for an opportunity to introduce yourself and to publicly express oncologists' and patients' concerns.

"You do not need to be an 'insider' to be an effective and successful lobbyist for your society," says Dillahunt. "You simply need to get to know legislators and be recognized as a

source of information on the impact of legislation on cancer care. Just as you wouldn't pick up the phone to call a complete stranger when you need a favor, you can't expect a warm reception on a crucial issue from the legislator unless you've taken the time to build a relationship."

Strengthening Advocacy Efforts on a Larger Scale

Beyond developing one-on-one relationships with legislators, oncologists can rely on the cancer community for advocacy support and resources.

"I worked with a legislator to establish the Ohio Legislative Cancer Caucus, a group of 40 legislators interested in cancer care issues," says Dillahunt. "The group meets quarterly to hear from speakers from the entire spectrum of care. We also utilize a monthly newsletter to legislators with general oncology news. We've had two successful legislative victories to eliminate some detrimental tax provisions and are involved in a number of other cancer and medicine coalitions. Coalitions are a good way for small societies to gain some strength in numbers."

Malloy also supports collaboration and caucuses. "We do work with local and regional medical societies, and sometimes we 'double dip' those people who are [members of multiple organizations] or involved in different political arenas," she says. Partnerships with various organizations enable oncologists to create a network of advocacy allies. "As a society," says Malloy, "MSHO really does rely heavily on national organizations to give us guidelines and represent oncology as best as they can."

Partnering Organizations

As Dillahunt and Malloy point out, oncologists do not have to go it alone to advocate for their patients. In addition to creating collaborative organizations and forums, physicians can team up with existing entities for additional support and resources.

Others in the Cancer Community

When addressing cancer-specific policies as well as broader health-related issues, try to present a united voice with other organizations in your cancer community. Potential allies include patient organizations such as those featured in the *Journal of Oncology Practice's* Patient Advocate Corner, state and regional oncology societies, groups representing local chapters of national organizations like the American Cancer

Society, nurses, social workers, and other health professionals, and cancer centers.

Noncancer Patient Groups

If you are advocating for broad health issues, such as insurance reform, you can form alliances with other physician societies or with organizations and individuals advocating on behalf of other medical conditions, particularly those that are serious and life-threatening.

Other Consumer Groups

Advocates for the elderly, minorities, and other consumers also may serve as allies in promoting better health coverage.

Taking the Next Step

ASCO's legislative and regulatory resources at www.asco.org/legandreg keep oncologists current on issues that have a substantial impact on the cancer community. The society's advocacy programs are designed to educate Congress, the media, and the general public about the effects of

legislation on the ability of oncology professionals to provide high-quality cancer care.

Online you will find information on key policy issues, contact information for Members of Congress, and dozens of tips and tools to help you become a successful advocate for your profession and for your patients:

- Legislative and regulatory issues: Information on ASCO's key policy issues including policy statements and background material.
- Medicare coverage: Information about your carrier, carrier advisory committee representatives, local state society, and research oncology- and hematology-related local medical review policies by state and subject.
- Advocacy tools: Find information on federal agencies and Congress as well as tips on how to communicate and meet with federal officials, including how to find your members of Congress.

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