Lamaze Advocacy Day Recap

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ABSTRACT

In this article, a participant of the first Lamaze Advocacy Summit provides a recap of the event. Legislative advocacy is becoming increasingly important to fight the U.S. rising maternal death rate and racial disparities within maternal–child health outcomes. The activities, goals, and emotions of the event are described.

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The first-ever Lamaze Advocacy Summit was held in Washington, DC, October 23 and 24, 2017, and was a resounding success! The summit, though brief, was packed with policy briefings, advocacy skills, networking, and visits to senators and members of Congress. Participants remarked constantly about the palpable energy and excitement.

Almost 100 leaders in childbirth from 27 states and 4 countries came to learn and advocate on Capitol Hill. Prior to coming, everyone benefited from a webinar called Advocacy 101: Introduction to Government and Advocacy.

Lamaze's Government Relations staff explained the basics so that participants new to advocacy visits would "hit the ground running." Board members Eileen DiFrisco and Alice Turner shared their past experiences visiting their representatives. The first day of the advocacy summit was spent in informative and inspiring sessions with Neel Shah, MD, MPP, and Ginger Breedlove, CNM, PhD, FACNM. Both were dynamic speakers who laid out many facts about the sad state of affairs of the U.S. maternity care system, and also inspired us to be active stakeholder advocates. Both Dr. Shah and Dr. Breedlove played instrumental

roles in the first-ever March for Moms, which took place on Mother's Day, 2017, and will happen again on May 5, 2018. Their guidance and enthusiasm put us in the mind-set to get to Capitol Hill and advocate the next day. Our learning was rounded out by the Lamaze Government Relations team, Mollie Giammarco and John Richardson, who reviewed again the specific advocacy talking points and the basic dos and don'ts of Hill visits (*do* make it personal, and *don't* stray off topic, just to name a couple). They briefed us on the bills we would be discussing, patiently answering many questions along the way. Finally, we role-played advocacy discussion in groups to boost confidence for the big day.

Three bills would be the focus of the visits: Improving Access to Maternity Care Act (HR 315), Save Women's Preventive Care Act (S 1045), and Preventing Maternal Death Act (HR 1318, S. 1112). All the bills were in committee. The Preventing Maternal Death Act has bipartisan support, although we came to find out that staffers of both Republican and Democratic senators and congressmen were unaware of the bill.

Advocacy 101: Introduction to Government and Advocacy and Advocacy Talking Points can be accessed at www.lamazeinternational.org/p/se/et

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Our goals were to raise awareness of issues related to birth including the value of childbirth education and to advocate for the importance of the three current bills. In addition, we hoped to continue to develop relationships with the legislators and their staff with a long-term goal of gaining their respect and becoming the experts they will turn to in the future for more information about childbirth-related legislation.

We boarded buses to Capitol Hill bright and early on October 24. After a picture with the entire Lobby Day crew, and countless others with our state groups and each other, and the requisite posting on social media, we headed to our appointments. The Lamaze staff had arranged all of the visits and created packets of information about the crisis in childbirth in the United States today, the work of Lamaze International, and the importance to women and babies of the three bills we were advocating for. The packets included evidence-based information about the current issues related to birth, including the rising maternal mortality rate, the high rate of preterm births, and the high cesarean rate.

There were 14 groups of 3–7 individuals, accompanied by a staff or board member who had done Hill visits in the past. Forty-five senators' offices and 61 House of Representatives' offices were visited by our passionate contingent! As expected, the majority of meetings were with health-care policy staff, though some lucky participants spoke directly with the senator or member of Congress.

We were struck that time and time again, staffers said they were familiar with Lamaze. This was due in part to the previous visits from our board and staff over the past 2 years, but also because many of the people we talked with shared their own personal experiences of childbirth and Lamaze classes.

Most of the health policy staff we talked with from both the Senate and the House were shocked about the rising maternal mortality rates, and although they were aware of the high cesarean rate, they were unaware of the risks of cesarean surgeries. Everyone we talked with expressed interest in the information we left with them.

Back at the hotel after the long but exhilarating day on Capitol Hill, participants eagerly shared their experiences. The energy was buzzing and contagious despite the very tired group that we were. When asked by outgoing Lamaze President Eileen DiFrisco if we wanted to have another summit in the future with visits to Capitol Hill, the group loudly expressed their agreement. As we all said goodbye to head back to life and work at home, we seemed to share a renewed connection with each other as childbirth educators and birth advocates. We were inspired and energized—a wonderful mind-set to be in to keep doing the work that we love and which is vital to the families we serve. We will be continuing to advocate for the Improving Access to Maternity Care Act, the Preventing Maternal Deaths Act, and the Save Women's Preventive Care Act, as Congress continues its work in 2018.

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To check the current status of the bills, visit www.govtrack.us