

West Virginia Oral Health Coalition Grassroots Advocacy Toolkit

Welcome

As an oral health advocate, the West Virginia Oral Health Coalition's "Grassroots Advocacy Toolkit" is your primer on how to effectively communicate and engage in the political process. Legislators depend on the people and organizations in their district to communicate with them when making policy decisions. Although they receive a great deal of information from their staff, state agencies, and lobbyists, much of what legislators actually decide depends on the views, interests, and preferences of the citizens who elect them. Let them know you are a resource for information on oral health and access to care.

You should make every effort to establish a genuine, personal rapport with legislators and their staffs — a relationship based on trust and a common understanding that you and organizations across the state are vital to the health, economy, and workforce of our state. Legislators are interested in your organization and the role you play in their district and the state. Remember that your legislator is interested in his or her community and constituents — regardless of his or her political party.

Legislators may have ideas or knowledge of resources that could benefit your clinic or organization. Meeting with your legislator provides an opportunity to gather information as well as voice your point of view. Legislators need to have diverse contacts in order to be successful in representing their districts and getting elected. They may also be aware of projects or resources that could benefit your community, such as redevelopment projects or major business expansions. Good relations with your legislators benefit and help strengthen the oral health safety net statewide.

Building a strong connection between your organization, the benefits of oral health care and services in your community, and your legislator is the thrust of the West Virginia Oral Health Coalition's grassroots advocacy activities. West Virginia Oral Health Coalition can benefit from what you learned in your meeting. So let us know how the meeting went and what you learned. For additional information, contact the West Virginia Oral Health Coalition at www.wvohc.org.

Grassroots Advocacy

Grassroots advocacy programs can be informational, reactive, proactive, or a mix. The West Virginia Oral Health Coalition is prepared to put forth legislation, respond to legislation that has already been introduced, mobilize grassroots volunteers when a bill is approaching final action, or commenting on published regulations. We are prepared to provide input to lawmakers, especially those on the committees or subcommittees that work on fine-tuning bills. We are also prepared to be proactive government relations partners with other groups by initiating legislation and providing input for laws and regulations as they are written. The Coalition monitors the Senate and House Health and Human Resources Committees.

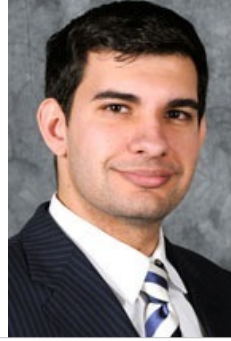
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House Health and Human Resources Committee



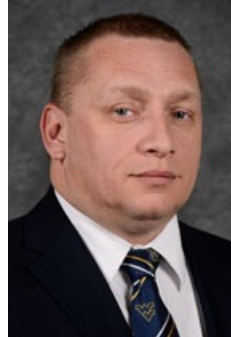
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Meeting With Legislators And Policymakers

When you develop a relationship with your policymaker, you will have begun to expand your potential for affecting policy. Your elected official will know who you are and what issues your organization stands for. Meeting with your Policymaker will help to solidify this relationship: a face-to-face meeting makes you “a real person” and not simply another signature on the bottom of a letter. And regular meetings with, and availability to, a Policymaker can help you and your organization be seen as a valuable resource on your issues.

Strategy

- When trying to schedule a visit, be flexible. Policymakers face huge demands on their time, especially when they are in session.
- If you are a community-based organization operating out of a Legislator’s district, you may be more likely to find time in their schedule while they are “home” on Monday and Friday, rather than when they are in session at the Capitol Tuesday through Thursday.
- Prepare and organize! Even when you can arrange a visit, your time will be limited, and you want to make the most of it. Bring materials to hand out if you need to present detailed information.

- Be courteous, not combative. Listen, as well as talk. Try to understand their concerns on your issue and present them with a win-win strategy.

Eleven Tips For A Successful Legislative Or Administrative Visit

1. Arrange a Visit. You should call or send an email of introduction. Include information on your subject area and background of your organization. Request an appointment to discuss your ideas or explain why their support on this issue is so important. Legislators are in their districts on a schedule, so call their office to make an appointment.

Many legislators have websites and 1-800 phone numbers to request meetings. See www.legis.state.wv.us to find legislative listings.

Do not be discouraged if occasionally your appointment is attended by a staff member instead of the Legislator. The staff are often more informed on certain issues of concern to you, and they have influence over their boss, if the argument is compelling. Building a relationship with the staff and your elected official can be quite beneficial, opening more doors for you in the future.

2. Plan for your visit. Organize a short presentation before you go to the meeting. If you are going with a group, get together before the meeting to map out your strategy. Assign each member of your group a topic to discuss; this ensures that the necessary matters are raised during the meeting. Prepare brief fact sheets and other reference materials for distribution at the meeting, or send them to the Legislator before the meeting for background information. Try to include people whom the Legislator knows.
3. Prepare your talk. Expect only 5-10 minutes to make your case or if you go with a group 20 minutes total. Bring a fact sheet and materials. Include local personal experiences and stories that show the affect your issue has on the community.
4. Practice. Tape your speaking points, listen to yourself and critique your presentation and then share it with someone else who knows very little about the issue. Ask that person if they understand the points you are trying to make.
5. Make it local! Whenever possible bring local constituents to the meeting and find out what impact the policy or bill would have on their district.
6. At the meeting, ask Legislators their feelings on your issues – if they do not know the issue, have background materials available and offer to explain and follow-up with answers to their questions. Bring copies of all important materials and duplicates of any information you had sent out previously. Do not depend upon them to have kept copies of your materials.
7. Don't fudge on the truth. If you don't know an answer, offer to get back with the correct information. By making this promise, it gives you a second chance to plug your issue.
8. Educate –don't preach. Everyone wants to know "What's in it for me?" As an advocate, your job is to present factual information that educates policymakers and/or their staff about the benefits of allocating resources to your issue.
9. Do not apply too much pressure. This is a surefire way to make a potential friend or a definite enemy. First impressions are important. Be assertive, not aggressive or obnoxious. Listen carefully to their

concerns, because ultimately they need to be addressed. If they have a point of view or a concern, note it so you can provide feedback or otherwise deal with their hesitation. The best solution is a win-win solution.

10. Contact for more information. Leave a business card or your name, address, email, and telephone number on the materials for the policymaker and/or their staff.

11. Send a thank you. A simple note of thanks goes a long way. In your letter of thanks recap what was discussed, what was planned for or promised (if anything) and your willingness to provide additional information if needed.

Source: "10 Easy Steps" courtesy of March of Dimes, Office of Government Affairs, May 1994, modified by Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health, 2004.

Other Ways to Connect with Legislators

Interactions with government officials may be through letters, telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, or formal testimony. Whatever the means, the West Virginia Oral Health Coalition is prepared to provide a constructive, considerate, reliable approach from the onset through the follow-up. Our goal is to raise the profile as a strong and effective advocate of the issues affecting the oral health of West Virginians.

Letter Writing Campaign

The letter (mailed, faxed, or e-mailed) is the most popular choice of communication with state and federal legislators. For a directory of state and federal legislators, visit www.legis.state.wv.us.

Letter Template

Dear <name>:

Thanks for your support of oral health in West Virginia. Oral health prevention such as << specify location >> benefit << tell your story >>. Oral health prevention is a cost effective investment because it improves health outcomes and reduces emergency room utilization. I am a voter and taxpayer, who believes that the investments today will reap financial and social benefits for our state.

Sincerely,

<name>

<address>

<city, state, zip>

Remember this is a simple model. Your email/fax/letter will be most effective if you use your own words and experiences.

Source: Preparing for testimony © Michele Strasz, Catalyst for Action Consultants, 1999

Telephone Calls

Whenever appropriate a telephone campaign is implemented in order to secure a successful lobbying effort.

In-District Meetings

Most legislators provide an informal opportunity to get to know constituents. These in-district meetings are great settings to discuss oral health issues that you care about with your Representative and Senator. Meetings take place close to home ("in the district"), in locations like coffee shops or libraries.

Legislator Invited to In-District Meetings

Although the collective voice of the West Virginia Oral Health Coalition works most effectively for some government interactions, individual legislators want to hear from their own constituents. Ongoing communication between members and their respective legislators is essential to our success. The Coalition encourages its members to develop relationships with their elected representatives. An opportunity to do this is through a site visit—when a member invites government officials to their clinic, school, etc. as a means of increasing understanding of oral health and the importance of our issues.

Testimony: Telling Your Story

Oral testimony is an important and more formal method for communicating the Coalition's view to government. The Coalition identifies "key contacts" to testify, educate them with all the facts on the issue at hand, and make all necessary arrangements. This may be a dental or medical professional, safety net provider, public health official or whoever best advocates our issue.

The following are questions that will help you identify your points to make in writing, for a meeting and oral testimony. These tools will provide you with some of the details you need to make a solid case regarding your issues of concern.

My name is.....

I am a voter in your district.....

My concern is.....

I am concerned about this because.....

Give an example of why you are concerned about this issue using a story, data, and experience.....

The ask? What I want you to do about my concern is.....

Source: Preparing for testimony © Michele Strasz, Catalyst for Action Consultants, 1999

Legislator Feedback Form

Instructions: *This protocol is intended as a guide to local advocates as they develop relationships with legislators. Please make a copy of the Legislator Feedback Form after each meeting is completed and return it to wworalhealthcoalition@gmail.com.*

Background Information Form

Legislator's Name:

If not Legislator, then Staff Member's Name:

Party _____ District _____

Experiences pertaining to oral health (personal, family member, community, volunteer)

Meeting Date: _____ Place: _____

Length of time: _____

Advocates attending:

Form completed by: _____

Organization: _____

Email: _____

What topic(s) did you discuss with the legislator?

Feedback from the legislator:

Additional information needed by the legislator:

Did you get a commitment for action? Yes or No