

7 tips for physicians looking to connect with lawmakers

MAR 15, 2021

Tanya Albert Henry

Contributing News Writer

Advocating for your patients and your practice 365 days a year to ensure Congress is passing laws that will have the most positive impact on medicine has never been more important.

For starters, even prior to the pandemic more groups were bringing advocates to Washington to meet with legislators multiple times throughout the year. That makes it increasingly important for physicians and their patients to also reach out to legislators in many ways over the course of the year so that their voices are heard, expert David Lusk told physicians at the 2021 AMA National Advocacy Conference.

Learn about the five big issues for physicians on Capitol Hill in 2021.

Lusk, who has more than 20 years' experience in policy and government affairs, told physicians that research has shown the best predictor of success with a legislative agenda is having relationships with elected officials.

While meetings in Washington are incredibly important, meeting with lawmakers back home—or virtually during the pandemic—is a critical step too, Lusk said. Meetings in your home district tend to have fewer distractions for the lawmaker, allow for longer interactions to take place and interactions can take place environments where it's easier to build rapport and a relationship.

Here are some of his tips to successfully engage with your lawmakers.

Help legislators understand how policy impacts health care. With 97% on Capitol Hill never having practiced as a physician, you need to help them understand how policy affects the practice of medicine and patients.

Create an ongoing conversation. You cannot get policymakers to change their minds with one conversation. Plan to continue conversations with lawmakers and make the conversation a two-way street by offering to serve as a resource to help them understand issues in which you have expertise.

Understand the demands on a congressional office. Realize that no matter what decision a lawmaker makes, not every constituent will be happy. Understand, too, that lawmakers have other influences on them, including from the party leadership, the media and the general public.

Get lawmakers to listen. Recognize the important role congressional staff has. They are the ones who do the groundwork and research; they serve as gatekeepers and are issue experts who recommend policies and actions. They are also the ones who ensure issues get before the member of Congress and which issues are shut out or ignored.

Be mindful of the conversation trap. You can have a good conversation where everyone is smiling and happy, but it may not be an effective meeting. You need to begin and end the meeting with your request. Also, ensure there is a commitment made. For example, do you agree to circle back in a month or get them a piece of information?

Find common bonds. Share an interest or a story rather than an opinion. If talking about Alzheimer's disease, for example, it is more powerful to talk about your mother who died from the disease and your fear of the disease for yourself and others than to rely solely on doling out statistics about the disease.

Don't forget to follow up. Say "thank you" to those you met with and thank staff and legislators for serving. Follow up and summarize the conversation you had and the commitments that were made. Provide any additional information requested as soon as possible.

Lusk said to remember the five P's: "Politely persistent people persuade politicians."

The AMA has created the Physicians Grassroots Network and helps physicians develop connections with members of Congress through the Very Influential Physician (VIP) program.