

## Success in Advocacy

### **Tips for Gaining Political Influence**

- Get to know legislators and agency regulatory officials well: their districts and constituencies, voting records, personal schedules, opinions, expertise and interests. Be sure to have a good understanding of the legislator and his/her concerns, priorities and perspectives.
- Acquaint yourself with staff members for legislators, committees and agency officials with whom you will be working. These people are essential sources of information and have significant influence in the development of policy.
- Acquaint yourself with staff members in the district as well. They can be a huge benefit and are usually the staffers you will see at district events such as: town halls, campaign events, public speaking engagements.
- Identify fellow advocates and partners to better understand the process, monitor legislation and assess strengths and weaknesses. Finding common ground on an issue sometimes brings together strange bedfellows but makes for a stronger coalition.
- Identify groups and legislators with whom you may need to negotiate for changes in legislation. Do not dismiss anyone because of previous disagreements or because you lack a history of working together. "Yesterday's opponent may be today's ally."
- Foster and strengthen relationships with allies and work with legislators who are flexible and tend to keep an open mind.
- Be honest, straightforward and realistic when working with legislators and their staff. Only make promises you can keep. Avoid misleading a legislator about the importance of an issue, the opposition's position or strength, or other matters.
- Do not be afraid to say "I do not know" when asked a question, just remember to promptly follow up with the requested information.
- Be polite, remember names and thank those who help you, both in the legislature and in the public health advocacy community.
- Learn the legislative process and understand it well. Keep on top of the issues and be aware of controversial and contentious areas. Understand the budget process as much as you can. (Know what departments and agencies hold authority over the programs that you care about.)
- Be brief, clear, accurate, persuasive, timely, persistent, grateful and polite when presenting your position and communicating what you need/want from the legislator or staff member.
- Be sure to follow up with legislators and their staff. If you offer your assistance or promise to provide additional information, do so in a timely and professional manner. Be a reliable resource for them today and in the future.

### **Meetings with Your Policymaker**

- To arrange appointments with policymakers visit the official's website or call his or her office to determine his or her preferred process for scheduling meetings.
- Before you place a call, write down notes about the points you wish to make.
- Identify yourself by stating your name and that you are a registered dietitian. If you are a constituent, be sure to include that in your request.
- State that you are requesting a meeting and identify the topic for discussion.
- If the process includes a written request, make it complete and concise. Include three options for a meeting date.

- If your affiliate has a strong relationship with the congressman/woman, be sure to mention that when you call.
- Once the appointment has been scheduled, send a letter or make a phone call confirming the meeting and identify who will be in attendance.

### **Speaking at a Public Meeting**

- Determine the purpose and tone of the event. Research the background and position statements of the official and/or organization sponsoring the public meeting and request the agenda and speaker information in advance.
- It is important to consider the views of your agency official/legislator. Consider what you would want to know in order to use this meeting to your benefit.
- What are the political and substantive benefits of your proposal? What do they need to learn about you as a professional? What is the human side? How can they use this information to help the citizens of your state?
- Prepare a few brief points that you intend to communicate.
- Use messages that demonstrate how registered dietitians are essential in health-care reform initiatives.
- Rehearsing your statement and/or question with colleagues in advance to ensure you are comfortable and convincing.
- Try to ask your question early in the meeting when time is less of a factor. Use your question to frame the brief comments you prepared in advance.
- Introduce yourself as a registered dietitian. If you are representing your affiliate include information about the number of members you represent in your affiliate.
- If deserved, commend the official for his or her work on health issues, particularly those related to prevention.
- Leave a copy of your key message with the official and his or her staff, along with your contact information.
- Be concise. Focus your message to a few sentences. Include the facts with information about what your role as a dietitian and why your expertise is relevant.
- Be prepared for questions. If you don't know the answer to a question, simply communicate that you will research the information and follow up. Then, be sure to do so.
- Offer to be a resource for the policymaker and his or her staff. You have much to offer in areas of mutual interest and your expertise can make their jobs easier!
- Be respectful and be a good listener by allowing the official to speak. Have a conversation and productive dialogue.
- Be prepared to hear objections to your request. Find clever and respectful ways to say "Yes and..." or to refocus the topic.
- Include a personal story. Present your request, bolstered by facts and an example from your experience that includes the impact on real-life situations with people.
- Ask for a commitment. Closing the discussion with an anticipated response is effective. Remind them that you are there for a specific reason.

### **Sample Effective Messages**

- “I am a registered dietitian and I work in... and primarily focus on....” “I am passionate about this program because...”
- “My background and expertise tell me that this is important because...” “We have done thorough research and our profession is united on these issues.”
- “We have reviewed all of the cost implications and have provided that data for you.”
- “Some of the opposition you can expect on this issue include these main points (list the points and the potential groups that would be opposed to your issue.)
- “Utilizing the registered dietitian in this health care reform program will ensure optimum success with preventive care.” (Show them how).
- “Similar measures have been enacted in other states with positive results.” (List them.) “We have met with the opposition and have worked out a compromise.” Or: “We have attempted to work out a compromise but the opposition is unwilling to meet/compromise.”
- Use messaging that relates your position back to the district or state. Talk about how the bill or regulation will affect “x” amount of people in the congressman/woman’s district or state. Talk about how much money would be saved in their district or state if policy “x” or bill “y” were implemented.

### **Follow Up**

- Provide written material for your targeted messaging. Always include your contact information along with information about what your role as a registered dietitian.
- Follow up with a thank-you note. In addition, if you met with staff, or if staff was included in the meeting, add a positive comment about their valued contribution.