

Lobbying 101: Delivering your message to lawmakers

Myth: Advocacy is better left to paid, professional lobbyists and is not in my job description as a Pharmacist.

Fact: Pharmacists are in the best position to demonstrate to lawmakers the impact of legislation on their patients, practice or profession. As a constituent your opinion is given more consideration than the professional lobbyist's. The lobbyist's role is to shepherd legislation through the political process and provide technical expertise. Your role compliments this effort by providing powerful, first hand evidence that lawmakers can relate to, shaping their support of our perspective.

Developing Your Message

Remember the three R's when developing your message and carrying it to lawmakers: **Relevance, Responsiveness and Repetition.**

Relevance: Lawmakers base decisions on personal experience. When you can relate an issue to your patients and give real examples, rather than abstract concepts, then our message hits home. When we talk about the value of the pharmacist - your specific experiences about the impact you had on your patients, will greatly reinforce our message.

Responsiveness: Your ability to persuade depends on anticipating arguments the opposition will make on an issue and providing a compelling response to these arguments. Those who may oppose payment for care-based services may question the dollars that will be expended. We can affirmatively respond that a pilot program would develop data that could show that the investment of dollars would bring much greater savings. In addition to responding to arguments, it is also important to respond to lawmaker's request for additional information. Follow-through is key to our objective of being viewed as a reliable resource on health issues by state lawmakers.

Repetition: Pharmacy and health issues are complicated, and legislators who do not have background in health care need our assistance. We need to give information in carefully worded, jargon free, language so that it is clearly understood. We compete for attention on our issues with many other interest groups and the better we focus on a message and deliver it continually, the more likely we are to gain the notice and support of the lawmaker. As a general rule, limit information on an issue to a one-page, concise worded, issue position. Providing more information may overwhelm the lawmaker and further complicate the issue. Coalition building not only gains widespread support for an issue, it is also a mechanism to repeat a consistent message through other groups.

Other Tips

Advocacy is a year-long process, not just January through April when the General Assembly is in session. Contact your lawmaker regularly during the interim and more often during the legislative session to lay groundwork for support of our issues. Aside from your regular contact, the Iowa Pharmacy Legislative Action Network will send out action updates throughout the session on issues where quick action may be critical. Your response to Action updates greatly increases our chance for success on the issue because lawmakers will view the issue with a sense of urgency. We will target Action updates to individuals that have a strong interest in the issue and/or key legislator on the committee considering the legislation. If you receive a request for more information, please do not hesitate to contact the Iowa Pharmacy Association to provide it. We will let you know what reaction or response we received and we ask you to keep us apprised.

Effectively Communicating with Your Legislators

When you need to get information to your legislators, select the method you are most comfortable using. When there is plenty of time, a personal letter, supported with information is helpful. Try to only discuss one issue, clearly state your point or concern, and then be sure to request appropriate action or response. When possible, identify the number or name of the proposed legislation, and the sponsors. Offer to follow up or identify other individuals who would be able to provide more information. Feel comfortable putting the issue in your own words and use relevant examples. Letters may be hand-written (legibility is a key), typed, printed, or computer generated. Individual messages are more effective than form letters, but some communication is better than none.

However, some issues are moving along very rapidly and quick action is demanded. A phone call or an e-mail message would be more appropriate. Those should be even more focused and to the point, but, as with the letter be sure to request a response. When you leave a phone message be clear and be articulate. Many legislators have found that e-mail messages are an effective way to interact with their constituents.

What works best? If you are comfortable with the computer interaction, e-mail is becoming a well accepted way to lobby. If you would rather write the legislator a letter and use mail or fax, that may be your best solution. But, if you would rather talk, the telephone is still a key way to reach your legislator in the State Capitol.

One last thought, talk to your legislator and see what type of correspondence they prefer. Some legislators are not as likely to use or check their e-mail. Perhaps some representatives have their staff constantly watch their incoming messages. Ask them what they would like.

Taking Your Message to the Statehouse

Iowa Pharmacy Association hosts an annual legislative day at the Capitol. From a sheer numbers perspective, having a presence at the Capitol demonstrates to lawmakers the importance of an issue for lawmakers. When lobbying at the Capitol, certain rules of decorum apply, but remember this is a citizen legislature that is accessible to the public.

Face to face contact with lawmakers takes place on the second floor of the Capitol in the Rotunda. Outside the House and Senate Chambers are tables with notepads. The notepads are to request a visit with lawmakers. The note asks for your name, the lawmaker you wish to speak with, and the reason for the visit. After filling out the note, give it to one of the doorkeepers stationed outside the doors of each chamber. The doorkeepers are easy to spot by their identical red blazers. The doorkeeper takes the note into the chamber and delivers it to the lawmaker. As a rule of thumb, give the lawmaker at least 15 minutes to appear before trying to contact someone else. If the lawmaker is not in the chamber, the doorkeeper will announce your name and let you know the lawmaker is unavailable.

When making your case to your lawmaker, remember that five minutes of the lawmaker's time is considered generous. There are many demands on their time and it is important to make your case brief. After presenting the issue, ask the lawmakers whether they will support your position. If they cannot, ask if there is a compromise position that they might be able to support or if there is additional information you can provide. Regardless of whether the lawmaker supports, opposes or is undecided on your issue, thank them for their time. Then follow up with an note - it will remind them of the issue.