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CNS

Capitol Hill Toolkit – A Guide to Successful Advocacy

Prepared by the:

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*Congress shall make no law... abridging the... right of the people...
to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*
(U.S. Const. amend. I)

The purpose of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS) and Congress of Neurological Surgeons (CNS) Capitol Hill Toolkit is to provide you with advocacy tools to ensure a successful meeting with your member of Congress and/or their legislative staff. Members of Congress and their staff want to understand the effects of the issues that are important to their constituents and their patients, and who better to convey healthcare information than a neurosurgeon from their district or state.

This toolkit will guide you through a Congressional visit and provide tips for success during and after your meeting, including pertinent information to enhance the content of your message.

What is advocacy?

- ❖ Building a relationship with your Members of Congress.
- ❖ Issue identification, research, and analysis.
- ❖ Lobbying/advocating for or against legislation.

Advocacy can be any or all of the above. It can be a simple “drop in” to your member of Congress’s office, or as complex as providing detailed analysis as to how a piece of legislation could negatively impact your practice or your patient’s access to care. Any activity that supports an idea or cause is advocacy, including lobbying a bill, relationship building, and educating legislators and the public.

Steps for Setting up a Meeting with Your Member of Congress

- I. Identify your Member of Congress. This information can be found at: <http://www.house.gov/> and <http://www.senate.gov/>.
- II. Call your legislator’s office and ask to speak with the Scheduler. Generally, this request is most effective if done at least one month in advance. Most offices require that you send a “Meeting Request” via email to the Scheduler. If that is the case, the office will provide you with that individuals name and their email address.
- III. Put “Meeting Request” and a specific date in the subject field of your email. In the body of your email:
 - ◆ While the exact date of your visit to Capitol Hill made be set, the more meeting times you provide for that day, the more likely you will get a meeting with the member of Congress. Be flexible with your schedule.
 - ◆ Let the scheduler know exactly how many people will attend your meeting and provide their names and home town.
 - ◆ Provide a brief synopsis of the issues you would like to discuss. Limit this list to three topics.
- IV. If you not hear back within a couple of days, resubmit your request and state that you are “just checking back in regarding your meeting request for DATE/TIME.” But don’t be too aggressive.

Prior to Your Meeting

- I. Learn your Legislator's Committee assignments as well as any general biographical information which is usually available on their web page. You never know what you might have in common – high school, college, military, etc. A personal connection is invaluable.
- II. Determine if your legislator has been supportive of neurosurgery's priority issues on Capitol Hill. This information can be found by emailing Adrienne Roberts, senior manager for legislative affairs in the AANS/CNS Washington Office. Her email address is aroberts@neurosurgery.org.
- III. If your legislator has been supportive, you want to thank him or her. If not, you want to educate them on these issues and ask for their support.

During a Legislative Visit

- I. Prepare a one to two minute **brief** introduction of yourself and/or your group. Then allow the group to introduce themselves and where they are from.
- II. Start with a positive note by finding some common ground. If your legislator has supported a priority issue for neurosurgery (i.e., voted for or co-sponsored a bill), thank them for that support.
- III. Please keep in mind your meeting will only last 15 to 20 minutes so you want to avoid getting distracted with non-essential conversation. Provide a **brief** overview of the issues (maximum three) you would like to discuss and your position. You want to focus only on a few issues to avoid overloading the legislator or their staff with too much information. Keep the conversation simple and polite. While legislators and their staff are educated on most issues, they are typically "generalists" unless it pertains to specific issues within the jurisdiction of their committee assignment. For instance, a legislator that sits on the House Ways and Means or Energy and Commerce Committees will have a much better understanding of Medicare payment issues, than a legislator that sits on the Agriculture Committee.
- IV. When discussing specific topics, it is important to use **personal anecdotes** to explain why the issue needs action. Explain a position with facts and use personal stories to back it up. Legislation affects neurosurgeons and their patients. Make sure they understand the personal ramifications or benefits from their actions.
- V. Be positive and avoid partisanship. It is also **extremely inappropriate to discuss political contributions**, whether personal or from NeurosurgeryPAC. Also, it is illegal to give your elected officials a campaign contribution in their official Congressional office.
- VI. Ask the legislator to take a specific action, such as co-sponsoring a bill or voting for or against a pending measure. If a legislator agrees to support an issue (i.e. co-sponsor a bill or vote in favor of that bill) **move on** to the next issue. Once they have said "yes," move on the next "ask." Do not waste valuable time rehashing an issue they have already agreed to support.

- VII. Show openness to counterarguments and politely respond to them if it seems appropriate to do so. Do not argue with the legislator or their staff.
- VIII. If the answer to a question from the legislator or staff is not known to you, it is okay to say so. Simply reply that you are not sure of that answer, offer to get an answer and follow up with that answer. This actually provides a good opportunity to keep the conversation going after you have returned home.
- IX. If you are unable to meet with your member of Congress, **do not underestimate the influence of their staff!** While they may be young (the average age of a Congressional staffer is 27), they are educated, well informed, and help provide direction to their boss's decision-making process.
- X. If there is time, it is appropriate to ask the legislator for a picture. If you use Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, post your picture with a nice comment, making sure to include your legislator's Twitter handle or hashtag so they see your positive feedback and can share your post with other constituents.
- XI. Thank them for their time upon leaving.

Meeting Logistics

- I. Be prepared to not necessarily meet in an office, especially for meetings with the U.S. House of Representatives. Offices are small, so some meetings are held in hallways outside the office or you may walk down to the cafeteria.
- II. Bring business cards and offer your cell phone number to the legislator or staff. Ultimately, you want to build this relationship, so provide a direct contact number.
- III. If you get lost, ask a Capitol Hill Police Office for directions – they are very helpful.
- IV. Allow time for long lines at the entrance of buildings for security screening. Wear comfortable shoes and leave metal objects — change, keys, etc. — in your hotel.
- V. If you are running late, call the office and let them know. The same goes if you need to cancel your meeting.

After Your Visit to Washington, D.C.

- I. Write a thank you letter or email summarizing your visit. Thank the member of Congress again for his or her support on your issues and most importantly, if there was a certain bill they agreed to co-sponsor or vote for, remind them of that bill.
- II. Maintain ongoing communication with the legislator and their staff through letters, emails, or calls. Offer to serve as a resource to them on health care issues.
- III. Find out when the legislator will be back in the district and offer to host a visit to your practice.
- IV. Keep the AANS/CNS Washington office informed about your advocacy efforts and activities. The D.C. Office can then follow up with your legislators.

Tips for an Effective Congressional Visit

DOs

- ◆ Do thank them for taking time to meet with you.
- ◆ Do thank them for considering your viewpoint.
- ◆ Do be forthright and informative in your communications.
- ◆ Do stick to an agenda.
- ◆ Do keep it simple and brief.
- ◆ Do provide an “Ask.” Tell the member of Congress or staff what you would like for them to do.
- ◆ Do provide the legislator/staff with a persuasive argument.
- ◆ Do cite specific issues and data and use personal anecdotes.
- ◆ Do offer to provide additional background information on the subject you are discussing.
- ◆ Do offer to assist the legislator’s staff in any way possible.
- ◆ Do let the legislator/staffer know why you care about the issue. Again, share personal stories.
- ◆ Do tell the legislator/staffer how the issue affects your patients.
- ◆ Do expect your legislator to be responsive to your views.

DON'Ts

- ◆ Don't be narrowly ideological.
- ◆ Don't be argumentative or confrontational.
- ◆ Don't be close-minded.
- ◆ Don't be overly technical. Dumb it down when necessary.
- ◆ Don't lose track of time. Just like you, legislators and their staff are extremely busy and you should be respectful of their time.
- ◆ Don't expect your Member of Congress to drop everything and focus solely on your concerns.
- ◆ Don't threaten them (e.g., “If you don't vote for this bill, I won't vote for you in your next election.”)

Remember, your elected officials want to be helpful if they can. You are highly respected by virtue of your profession. If you follow the above tips, you should be able to have a productive visit with your legislators and be well on your way to establishing a good working relationship into the future.