

What Psychiatrists Need to Know About...

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Advocacy

There are many reasons people—yes, even psychiatrists!—avoid making the effort to engage in the public political arena. “Politics is dirty.” “I don’t know enough about an issue to comment.” “Why would my opinion matter?” “I really don’t know who my elected official is.” “I really don’t think an elected official wants to be seen in public with a PSYCHIATRIST.”

And if we are really honest with ourselves we might admit to being a little shy, worried about embarrassing ourselves, or even not knowing what to call an elected official! (“Is she a Senator or Representative or Congressman or just plain Ms.?”)

But frankly, there are even more reasons why a psychiatrist should engage. Your opinion does matter! You care for the patients who live in an elected official’s district, and you know what the local system needs. You are struggling with what seem like unfair business practices from insurers. Your local emergency room is struggling to keep up with the numbers of people with mental illness accessing healthcare through its doors. You need legislators to understand the nature of addictive disease or how issues with mental illness play out in your community. Perhaps even more important, you treat people whose illness is still somewhat stigmatizing, and they may not be able to advocate for themselves. But you can be their voice.

You are a doctor. You know things legislators don’t. That is the most important reason for picking up your pen or your phone or pulling out your checkbook. Legislators need and want to hear from you. The mechanics of how to do it are easy.

It’s About Relationships

Perhaps the easiest way to engage in the political process is not to view it as a lobbying effort. Instead, the most natural thing in the world is for you to open yourself up to building a cordial relationship with your elected officials. Perhaps you go to church with your state or federal elected official. Or see them at the club or on the golf course or tennis court. You bump into them at the grocery store. That is great! (And please let the NCPA office know if you have these kinds of connections.)

If you don’t know them, make a point to get to know them. Write them a note of congratulations for winning the election. Offer to meet for coffee to give them background information on mental health issues. Offer to be a resource for them to call when they have a question about an issue or a bill in front of them. Just reach out to them.

If you like their politics, make a campaign contribution. Offer to host a small gathering at your home to meet your neighbors, and ask your neighbors to bring checks! I’ll

never forget the day when an NCPA member called to talk about the most interesting situation: he was not only hosting a meet-and-greet at his home for a former neighbor from one political party who was running for one Senate seat, but he wanted to know if it was okay to host an event for another candidate with the opposing party who was running for a different Senate seat. He did both. That is what I call bipartisan support!

The Legislature Is Now in Session

By the time you read this newsletter, the “short” session of the N.C. General Assembly will be mid-way through and you will have read about the Governor’s budget requiring prior authorization for doctors to prescribe psychiatric medications to Medicaid patients. Or you may have an opinion about the medical marijuana bills that have been introduced. Now is the time to let your elected official know your thoughts. Further, NCPA needs your help raising awareness about the issues that we have identified as key this session. Visit www.ncpsychiatry.org/legislative-priorities to see the 2013-2014 Legislative Priorities.

Call your legislators’ offices, speak to them or to their LAs—lobby-speak for “legislative assistants.” Reach them at their home or office on the days they are not in session; sessions typically are held Monday

evening through Thursday midday. You could also make an appointment with their legislative office in Raleigh. If you do come to Raleigh, call the NCPA office, and we will come with you. Even quick notes or emails that include your candid, but polite, thoughts can get the job done.

After all, you are part of their constituency. You helped elect them. You matter to them, and your helpful guidance and suggestions for improving your city and your state can make a difference for the patients you treat and for your profession! 🌱

RESOURCES FOR ADVOCACY EFFORTS

How to Find Bills on the Internet: Visit www.ncleg.net

Click on “Legislation/Bills” menu across the top of the page, then follow the instructions and tips given. If you know the bill number, you can enter it into the “Find a Bill” search on the top-right of www.ncleg.net.

How to Find Your Legislator: Visit www.ncleg.net

Click on the “Who Represents Me?” menu across the top of the page. Select the map box for the office you are seeking (federal or state) and type in your address in the search box on the map. The District number will display. Scroll down to find the “select by district” boxes and insert your district number there. When you hit enter, you will be taken directly to your representative’s legislative page where you can browse the tabs for information including bills introduced, votes, committee assignments.

APA Resource Page: www.psychiatry.org/advocacy--newsroom

NCPA Advocacy Page: www.ncpsychiatry.org/legislative-priorities-updates

APA Holds Advocacy Leadership Conference

During the last week of March, APA members from over 40 states traveled to Washington, DC for APA’s annual Advocacy Leadership Conference where they received advocacy and issue training and met with their elected members of Congress to encourage better access to psychiatric care for our nation’s citizens. Keith McCoy, M.D., F.A.P.A., NCPA’s Legislative Committee Chair, attended the conference on behalf of our district branch.

Attendees heard from nationally recognized political prognosticator Larry Sabato, Professor of political science from the University of Virginia, followed by the event’s key note speaker Representative Tom Price, M.D. (R-GA). In addition, registrants heard the perspective of what it’s like to be a psychiatrist working on the Hill from APA’s Jeanne Spurlock Congressional Fellow Ellyn Johnson, M.D.



Representative David Price (left) and NCPA Legislative Committee Chair Keith McCoy, M.D., F.A.P.A.

Attendees of the conference were also briefed on APA’s priority legislative items, including a recently introduced bill to

incentivize the hiring of more psychiatrists in the Veterans Administration, federal funding of mental health services and research, permanently fixing Medicare’s flawed reimbursement system, and bringing the parties together on comprehensive mental health reform legislation.

The APA Government Relations has created a training webinar, Advocacy Training 101: Basics to Promoting Mental Health to Policymakers, a course that aims to help psychiatrists and mental health professionals understand and participate in the legislative process by advocating for mental health issues. By completing this free course, participants can earn up to 1 *AMA PRA Category 1 Credits™*. Visit www.apaeducation.org under “New Courses” for more information.

“The Advocacy Day experience has been tremendously helpful in teaching me how to effectively and efficiently interact with legislators and policy-makers,” said Dr. McCoy. “I have been able to build relationships with congressional staff members and even one Congressman, which extend beyond just the Advocacy Day experience. I have also noticed how much more easily I interact with local and state officials because of this training. I highly recommend this training for those who are interested in increasing their role in advocacy and policy.”