

Grassroots Lobbying Primer

Grassroots lobbying of Congressional members can include different activities, including visits to their Capitol Hill or district offices, conducting facility visits or attending town hall meetings.

The overall goal of grassroots lobbying is to develop a working relationship with your legislator and his or her staff. They need to understand the importance of O&P services that benefit patient care. This is your opportunity to most effectively influence the legislative process. That means as an O&P professional, you need to develop a personal rapport with your member of Congress that includes two-way communication.

Members of Congress want to hear from their constituents -- and they will listen. Each Member must consider a vast number of issues. These issues are divided among legislative assistants (LA) who are responsible for following legislative activity and constituent support for each of their assigned issues. LAs may be responsible for 20 or more broad issues and are seldom experts in all of them. They rely on a multitude of resources to keep themselves knowledgeable on these issues, including AOPA and individual O&P professionals.

O&P professionals must be proactive and offer themselves as a resource to Members and their staff. As a professional, you are in a prime position to provide them with information – in a captive atmosphere – about your profession and how your services affect the community. Once you have developed a working relationship with the Member and his or her staff, they will rely on you in the future and ask for your input as these issues come forward. By establishing yourself as a reliable source of information, you are improving your access to the Member. Keep in mind that as O&P issues come before Congress, it is much easier to ask a friend for something than it is to ask a stranger.

General Guidelines

O&P professionals' strength lies in their ability to effectively communicate information. This is important in educating clients and patients as well as influencing policy makers. Whether you write, call or visit your legislator, here are some basic guidelines to follow. They are:

- **Know Your Legislators.** Learn as much as possible about where they stand on issues. For example, you may want to ask: How have they voted in the past? What is their political philosophy? Legislators who support your position can help you develop your strategy. But those who say “I don’t know” need more of your attention. And those who are opposed can sometimes be persuaded to change their minds. Never assume what your legislator will think — find out.
- **Identify Yourself.** Identify yourself as a constituent by providing your address and congressional district. Secondly, identify yourself as an O&P professional. In addition, identify yourself as a member of AOPA, the Academy or any other appropriate national, state or local organization.
- **Be Prepared.** Know your issue and the impact of the legislation you support and the impact it will have on your patients, profession, community and Medicare. Keep abreast

of issues through AOPA and other resources. Read *AOPA In Advance*, the bi-weekly e-mail newsletter, and our monthly magazine, the *O&P Almanac*.

- **Be Specific.** State the action you want the legislator to take: (1) Vote in a certain manner; (2) Introduce legislation; (3) Co-sponsor a bill or; (4) Make a floor statement. If the member expresses support for your position, hold him or her to that commitment. Whenever possible, refer to a specific piece of legislation or public law by its number.
- **Be Concise** in your written or verbal communications. Legislators and their staff have limited time to devote to any one issue. A one- or two-page fact sheet can summarize your points and is more likely to be read and filed for future reference than a 10-page document. In face-to-face meetings, highlight key issues and leave behind a fact sheet as a reminder of essential points you want the legislator to have at hand. AOPA has fact sheets for you to use. Be sure to call the government relations staff if you have any questions.
- **Be Constructive.** Be pleasant, polite and use a “soft-sell” approach even if a legislator does not agree to support you in a specific instance. If there are problems with a particular program or bill, admit it and identify alternative solutions. Do not threaten or make negative comments. You are looking to continue the relationship and will probably need the legislator’s support on other issues in the future. In the meantime, feel confident that you have shared your information in positive manner.
- **Follow-up.** Follow legislation throughout the legislative process and be prepared to contact your legislator several times on one issue. You can contact the legislator prior to a committee vote, before a floor vote or when there’s a lot of press activity surrounding the issue. Keep the pressure on him or her by your continued contact on the issue.
- **Continued Rapport.** Continue to develop rapport with your legislator and his or her staff. It’s a critical part of the lobbying process. In addition to contacting them about specific legislation or issues, it is appropriate to congratulate them on honors received or elections won or thank them for a positive vote on your issue or on actions taken that are important to the community. Legislators appreciate, but seldom receive, thank you letters for actions taken. Be among those who show appreciation for their support.

Be sure to share positive information about your profession. Sharing a news article or research study on O&P with your legislator is an ideal way to promote your profession and highlight the impact it has made on the legislator’s constituents. This is an easy way to further develop rapport with legislators. You are also giving them information they can use to justify their support of AOPA positions.

Persistence and patience are two words to keep in mind when dealing with legislation. Keep in mind that it can take a very long time for Congress or a state legislature to pass a bill. It may take several years to get a single piece of legislation passed. Persistence and patience are two key factors in lobbying.

Personal Visits with Legislators

Personal visits with your legislator are an effective method of grassroots advocacy. These visits lay the groundwork for future communication with the legislator and his or her staff. A face-to-face meeting can be held in Washington or in the member's district office. To make your meeting more effective:

- **Be On Time.** Capitol Hill and the district offices are busy places and time is of the essence.
- **Establish Rapport.** After introductions and handshakes, start the meeting with a comment about mutual interests – friends, activity in the state, a recent vote – to tie you or your profession to the legislator.
- **State the Purpose of Your Visit.** Tell the Member who you represent, what you want to talk about and why you are talking with him or her. If you are advocating for a specific bill, be sure to refer to it by number, explain its status and what action you would like the Member to take.
- **Select a Spokesperson.** If there are two or more people going to the appointment, identify a spokesperson who can lead the discussion and ask other members of the group to speak as the discussion moves along.
- **Use Your Expertise and Share Success Stories.** You are there to share your expertise on the issue you're discussing. Be prepared to share brief anecdotes and success stories to make your point.
- **Listen Carefully and Answer Questions Truthfully.** Allow the legislator to share his or her insights or positions with you. Though you may not agree with the views expressed, this gives you the chance to respond based on your knowledge and experience. Listen carefully and identify issues of concern to the Member. Answer all questions to the best of your ability. If you do not know the answer to a question, say you will find the answer and get back to them once you do know.
- **Summarize Major Points.** Wrap up the meeting by summarizing the major points of discussion and leave behind a fact sheet with your business card.
- **Leave Promptly.** At the end of your allotted time, thank the Member and his or her staff member for their time and leave promptly.
- **Follow-up.** Send a thank you letter to the member and his or her staff and take the opportunity to again summarize your main points. If you have promised to send additional information, do so promptly.

Letters to Legislators

Never underestimate the power of a constituent's letter. Letters expressing a given viewpoint can change a legislator's mind. It is particularly helpful when that legislator is wavering on an issue. Personalized or even handwritten letters from constituents, on their own stationery, are the most effective. If the letter needs to be there immediately, consider faxing or using e-mail and mailing the original. It is important that letters be as simple and clear as possible. To make your letter more effective:

- **Keep It Short.** Limit your letter to one or two pages.
- **Use Appropriate Address and Salutation.** Use the correct title, address and salutation and spell each correctly.
- **Be positive.** Legislators, like most of us, respond best to praise, not criticism. Tell them you supported them in the past (if you did) and how you need their help. It is also appropriate to acknowledge their previous support on this or other issues.
- **Ask For a Reply.** When they do reply—and they usually will—write again. Compliment positive actions taken or encourage reconsideration of actions not taken. When a legislator differs from your position, his or her response may include such language as “careful study” or “due consideration” or “keeping your comments in mind.” These are often negative indicators and do not show commitment. Write back for clarification. Doing so lets the legislator know that you are not easily misled, are serious about the issue and are following his or her actions carefully.
- **Establish Yourself as a Resource.** You are an expert in your field and can provide additional information regarding the field, the issue and the impact of proposed legislation.
- **Write neatly.** Handwritten letters can be as persuasive as typed letters. But your points must be readable to be understood. Generally, if you are writing in a capacity related to your employment, it lends professional credibility. If your letter is part of a letter-writing campaign, you can hand write the letter, since it gives the appearance of a grass roots, “ordinary citizen” response, rather than one from a “special interest.”

Sample Letter to a Member of Congress

Use Letterhead OR
Your Name
Your Address
Your City, State, Zip Code

Date

To a Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

To a Representative:

The Honorable (full name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

Introduction

- Identify yourself
- Briefly reference your occupation or business
- Identify your purpose in writing (AOPA Action Alert will give you this; otherwise, say you want to meet with him or her to talk about O&P issues)

Purpose of Letter

- Explain why you are writing
- Reference by bill name and/or number, if appropriate
- Give facts, figures, and/or personal experiences and anecdotes that support your position

Closing

- Request a reply indicating his or her position regarding your request
- Establish yourself as a resource
- Thank the member of Congress for his or her consideration of your position

Sincerely,

(Signature)
Your Name

Congressional Staff

It is not enough to just know the member of Congress. Because of the sheer volume and ever-increasing complexity of legislative proposals, legislators must rely heavily on their staff to research and follow the progress of legislation that is of interest to their constituents. Staff prepares brief summaries, floor statements and recommendations on issues.

Each member of Congress is responsible for an incredible number of issues that come before Congress. Members turn to their staff for assistance and advice and rely on them to keep them informed. Issues are divided up in each office and each staff member has many issues to follow. Congressional staff members develop expertise on their issues, the players and politics of the committees, the legislative process and the interest groups and constituencies involved with legislation.

Staff members are a key link between Members and constituents, lobbyists and the public, as well as an essential element in the development and promotion of legislation. It is important to develop a working relationship with staff members as they participate in every step of the legislative process. They could be your best access to the Member.

There are three kinds of staff: (1) personal office staff; (2) district staff; and (3) committee staff. You may have contact with all of them, depending on the issue and your Member's committee assignments. Congressional staff members are generally young, often in their twenties. Office space is very limited and their offices are often no more than just a desk in a room with many others.

Each aide covers many issues and may have limited knowledge of O&P issues. This means you have an excellent opportunity to educate them on O&P services and the impact they make for patients and their families.

Personal Staff

There is a basic staff structure in congressional offices, although there are variations from office to office. Some of the key staff members are:

- ***Chief of Staff (COS)*** - The chief of staff is often in charge of all office activities. He or she is usually involved in all legislative and political decisions. The COS evaluates the political ramifications of legislation and keeps the Member apprised of district and Capitol Hill political developments.
- ***Legislative Assistant (LA)*** - The LA works on specific policy issues and is responsible for all aspects of these issues for the Member. The LA follows legislative activity; handles constituent mail and casework; serves as liaison with committee staff; meets with constituents and lobbyists; makes recommendations to the Member regarding the pros and cons of legislative proposals, and; advises the Member of grassroots efforts among the Member's constituents. The LA often writes the Member's floor statements, speeches and position papers.

- **Legislative Director (LD)** - Many offices have a senior LA who is designated the Legislative Director. The LD has overall responsibility for all issues.
- **Legislative Correspondent (LC)** - The LC handles routine constituent mail and often works closely with the LA to respond to more complex correspondence.
- **Press Secretary** - The press secretary is the chief media spokesperson for the Member.
- **Scheduler/Personal Secretary** - This staff person makes all appointments for the Member and makes travel arrangements.

District Office Staff

All Members have at least one office in their district or state. The district staff often represents the Member at local activities and also does casework for constituents.

Committee Staff

Most committees and subcommittees have both a majority and minority staff to advise Members during hearings and mark-up sessions. The top staff persons are the *Staff Director* and *General Counsel*. Professional staff members are the policy experts and analysts in specific issue areas.

Congressional staffs are a vital link between members of Congress and their constituents, lobbyists and the public as well as an essential element in the development and promotion of legislation. It is imperative that you develop a working relationship with key staff and act as a resource for them. The better the staff person understands your issue, the greater the chances are they can sell it to the legislator.