

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Values. Ethics. Advocacy.

South Dakota State Medical Association How to Lobby

The involvement of physicians, medical students and alliance members is critical to the success of SDSMA's grassroots lobbying efforts. A vital asset to SDSMA's professional lobbying team, only you can give your state legislators and members of our Congressional delegation the most accurate picture about how the issues really affect the practice of medicine and the patients of South Dakota. Below are some tips for lobbying your legislator on the issues of importance to you.

Get to Know Your Audience

Who is your elected representative? Is your representative a Republican or a Democrat? Liberal, moderate or conservative? Does he/she serve on a key committee?

One Issue at a Time

Every communication – telephone, written or personal visit – should stick to one issue. You should not present a laundry list of concerns; pick the most vital and explore it in depth. You can always call, write or visit again with another issue.

Start with a Letter or a Phone Call

Build a relationship with your elected leader before making your actual visit. You can even organize a few of your friends to write or call on the same topic – a dozen or more letters on the same topic will get a legislator's attention. When you call, ask to speak with the 'Health LA' (legislative aide). Politely explain your concerns and ask for the representative's specific position on the issue. For increased effectiveness, write an original letter (form letters are more likely to be ignored) and make the letter look professional.

Know Your Issue and Bring Effective Handouts

Present your opinion and back it up with facts – background information, including statistics and studies that support your point of view. If there's a bill you're interested in, include the bill number. Know the opposing arguments and 'frequently asked questions' and have answers ready to go. Make your legislator's job easier.

Use Personal Anecdotes

Nothing drives home the importance of an issue like a personal story. Students can offer credible anecdotes from their own medical school experiences. Tell your legislators how the issue affects your colleagues and patients. This is the best way to persuade your legislators that what may seem like an abstract or arcane point really affects his or her constituents deeply.

Offer Solutions

Don't just talk about how bad a problem is; tell your legislator what you'd like to see done to fix it. In addition, let the representative know what he/she should do: make speeches, cosponsor legislation, write to the appropriate agency or vote for/against a bill, etc.

Build a Relationship

Making contact repeatedly and being credible and reasonable every time will help build a relationship between you and your legislator. The legislator's aide will know you by first name and your legislator will

try much harder to be present when you visit. You'll quickly become part of your legislator's support system and he/she might even come to you for advice. Nothing is more valued than an informed, active, and friendly constituent!

Act Locally

Every legislator has a district office and most hold local meetings. Meeting with a local staff member is a great way to raise your concerns and is the next best thing to a Pierre visit.

Timing

The most eloquent letter or call does no good if it comes after a vote. If a letter arrives too early, it is forgotten. Letters should generally arrive a few days before the vote, whether in committee or on the full chamber floor. However, don't let waiting for the right time to come along keep you from writing. It is better to reach someone early in the debate than after they have made up their mind or not at all.

Follow-up

Be polite and persistent by following up with a thank-you letter. Legislators clearly remember the constituents that follow up. It reminds your legislator of how passionate you are about the issue. Ask for an update on where the issue stands. Some issues take time and they'll come up again and again. It's the nature of public policy.

Personal Visits

The personal visit is the single most effective lobbying technique. Like medical staff, overworked aides and legislators have triage systems for handling constituents and issues. Form letters and emails get the least attention. Next are phone calls and original letters. The personal visit rates highest priority and the issues brought up are attended to more quickly and seriously. Your representative will be impressed with the effort you're putting forth and will usually make time to meet with you. A visit to Pierre makes a powerful statement, and no legislator wants to say no to you in person!

Common Sense Rules - Courtesy and Respect

- Be fair, realistic and reasonable.
- Kill them with kindness. Start with a compliment.
- Introduce yourself.
- Address your legislator as "Representative" or "Senator."
- Make your appointment well in advance. Indicate the date you'll visit and what you'd like to discuss.
- Be honest. If you lose your credibility, you won't get it back.
- Be a good listener - don't do all the talking; have a conversation.
- Arrive on time.

Issues

- One issue per meeting.
- Be brief. Don't let the legislator or staffer sidetrack the meeting.
- Be prepared when you arrive. Know what you are going to say.
- Present your opinion, bolstered by facts, figures and a personal story.
- Know and understand opposing arguments. Be prepared to discuss them.
- Fifteen minutes (possibly 20) is a realistic expectation for your meeting. Do not be surprised if your meeting starts a bit late or is cut short or you are not able to speak directly to the legislator. Often, staff members meet with constituents – treat them in the same manner as you would the member.
- Never lie, never guess. Just say, "I don't know, but I'll get back to you," and then get back to them!
- Gently remind your representative that you're a constituent and that you always vote. All politics is local.
- Be passionate (not emotional), and never leave in anger.

Closing

- Leave when your time is up.

- Ask for a commitment from the member to support your position, but do not apply pressure or be threatening.
- Have a short statement or fact sheet to leave behind. If it's in writing, it has a better chance of being remembered.
- Never end in harsh words or personal remarks. You will damage your credibility and hamper further communications.
- Say "thank you" and indicate you're looking forward to following up on this issue.

Afterwards

- Write a brief thank you note.
- Indicate that you will be monitoring the issue closely.
- Answer any questions you couldn't answer in the meeting.
- You may want to personally invite the member and his or her staff on an informal tour of your medical school/hospital.