

How to Engage & Educate New Legislators

Following every election, a new slate of local, state and federal policy makers may be taking the reins of government. As hospital and health system leaders, we have the responsibility to do what we can to help them understand healthcare in their community. The time we invest early-on will be reaped many times over as they view the hospital as a key resource for healthcare issues and questions throughout their time in office. If we don't tell them, how will they know? This knowledge will help them be better prepared to undertake the awesome responsibility of governing.

Here are some things you might consider doing to assist them:

- **If you are able, invite them to the hospital.** With the COVID-19 pandemic, it might not be possible to invite your legislators onto your campus. What other ways can you use to show them your facility(s)? Almost everyone has visited their community hospital either personally or in support of a friend or relative. But have they ever had a comprehensive tour of all of the work that your hospital does? Consider including key outgoing, knowledgeable staff members to share their experiences with new legislators on their visit. Their passion for their work will be evident and will provide a more personal view of how healthcare is delivered.
- **Explain the jargon.** Healthcare is complicated, and many legislators – especially those new to office – may feel hesitant to ask questions or learn more. Take time to explain some of the basic facts about your hospital, the population and payer mix that you serve, the challenges that you face. Explain some of the complicated healthcare legislation that's in debate and ask what questions they have. Having new legislators look to you as a source of information will only benefit you in the future.
- **Understand the other side of the story.** While educating new leaders about the work of the hospital and the legislative issues that may impact that work, prepare them for the other side of each issue. Our opposition is likely to be engaging them soon, as well. Be sure that they are prepared for what they may hear.

- **Consider the context.** While you may be eager to show the newest and nicest areas of your hospital, new legislators may be gaining a different perspective than you want them to understand. For example: when showing them a new building, also share the economic impact of that work and how it served a need for patient care in the area. Also, consider showing them ways that your hospital is working efficiently to provide the highest quality care to their constituents.
- **Allow them to share their experience.** Everyone has a personal experience with their hospital. This may be a good place to start your conversation. Allow the legislator to tell you about the experiences they've had in your health system. This will allow you to better understand where they are coming from and the questions and concerns they may have. It also may help you learn their personal connections – both personal and professional – with your hospital that you can build on as the relationship grows. Some legislators will have preconceived notions about your hospital and it's important to understand so that you are able to help to reshape their opinions and have a good relationship.
- **Listen.** What are their concerns? What are their passions? When you know more about them, you can tell the story of your hospital in their language – Or find a trustee, physician or local community leader who can!
- **Communicate regularly.** Healthcare is complicated, as is healthcare legislation and regulation. It will not be learned and understood in one seating. Make a plan for regular communication with this legislator. Find out their preferred method of contact (phone, email, text) and then follow-up quarterly – at a minimum – to answer questions, update them about the work of the hospital, or just to thank them for their work. Don't wait until a serious issue arises to engage them again.

Need Assistance?

For grassroots and advocacy assistance, contact:

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