

RPA's Grassroots Advocacy Helps Congress Understand Kidney Issues at Home

Members of Congress rely on national trade and industry organizations — such as RPA — as sources of expertise to inform them about important health policy issues as well as ramifications of policy decisions on the communities that they represent. So, members of Congress will respond in immediate and personal ways to constituents — you. Grassroots advocacy helps legislators understand how health care policies affect their constituents: persons and families in need of health care, employers who provide health care, individuals and organizations that provide health care and services, insurers, pharmaceutical companies, and all other members of the community they represent. Of course, in most cases, these constituencies are often at odds on similar issues based on their own stations.

To put this in perspective: A senator or representative may hear from four physicians about the negative impact malpractice insurance costs have had on their practices, but also may hear from 35 individuals or family members of individuals who may have been subject to medical errors, 10 employers who want to further safeguard their employees from medical malpractice, or six insurance companies who want protection from provider related errors, etc. There truly is strength in numbers and unless physicians are willing to contact their elected officials, the voice of physicians will be overshadowed by other interests who can communicate by the numbers.

An effective grassroots program fosters relationships with members of Congress. It encourages communicating with members with an “ask” or a “need.” Developing ongoing relationships with policymakers and community leaders will help distinguish you with your members of Congress and lend credence to your concerns when you make periodic contacts rather than only when in need.

RPA recognizes that its members' time is limited, so RPA uses an online grassroots advocacy package called CapWiz. This online legislative action package at www.capwiz.com/renalmd/home connects RPA members to their elected officials directly through RPA's “Legislative Action Center.” Specifically, CapWiz enables RPA to educate our membership on legislative issues and helps our members identify their elected federal representatives so they can communicate views to lawmakers via targeted e-mails developed by RPA's policy staff. Or, RPA members can create their own messages at any time to send to Congress.

Many of you receive our “action alert” e-mails asking you to “TAKE ACTION” on targeted issues identified by RPA and

communicate the prepared message or messages to your elected members in Congress. This online grassroots advocacy has proven very effective, and RPA appreciates your help in furthering the organization's legislative agenda. In 2005, 1,232 e-mails were sent to congressional lawmakers from RPA members through RPA's Legislative Action Center! Our first action alert in 2006 regarding medical malpractice legislation resulted in 354 e-mails to lawmakers from RPA members — the largest response to an alert to date! Please keep up the pressure as we have our work cut out for us on Capitol Hill.

Advocacy at the State Level

State and local policymakers and their staffs also should be included in any grassroots advocacy efforts. It is helpful to maintain contact with offices of the governor, state legislators, mayor and other community leaders. The U.S. Congress has been hamstrung by partisan politics, the war in Iraq and mid-year elections forcing health-related policy to take a back seat. In the absence of national health policy, states are enacting their own laws at great frequency. For example, the U.S. Congress has been struggling for years on the best way to deal with the alarming number of uninsured Americans and has yet to enact nationwide legislation. Massachusetts just passed sweeping legislation mandating health insurance for all state residents.

State legislatures are also increasingly undertaking kidney disease-related legislation. From promoting awareness of chronic kidney disease (CKD) to mandating that laboratories calculate estimated glomerular filtration rates when performing serum creatinine tests, the fact that renal-related issues are now getting attention from state legislatures further underscores the importance of advocacy by nephrologists at all levels of government.

On a related note, Women in Government (WIG), an association of women who serve on state legislatures, has made CKD a priority policy issue for the year and has even created a CKD policy resource center within its website at www.womeningovernment.org/kidney. This webpage contains clinical and policy information to educate WIG members. RPA staff met with WIG representatives to discuss ways to collaborate and further the goals of each organization.

RPA's Nephrology Coverage Advisory Panel has compiled information on state legislative initiatives specific to kidney disease and has a state-by-state breakdown on its website at [www.renalmd.org/ncap](http://www renalmd.org/ncap).

For more about RPA's grassroots program or if you are interested in becoming a key contact — a go-to member willing to communicate with legislators beyond CapWiz — visit RPA's grassroots website at www.renalmd.org/members_online/members/c_grassroots.cfm. ❖

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