

The Legislative Process

The ABCs of Lobbying

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Part Three

Who are lobbyists? Have you ever called, written, e-mailed, or visited your congressman or woman? If you answered yes to either of these questions, you are a lobbyist.

While you may have lobbied on your own time without monetary compensation, there are professional lobbyists who are paid for their activities on behalf of a client, a special interest group, or an employer. These lobbyists are required by the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 to be registered with the federal government (Maskell, 2001).

The focus of this article, however, is not on the professional lobbyist but on you, the private citizen. In fact, the most effective lobbyists are regular citizens who come to Washington simply to tell their stories (www.your-congress.com, 2003). It is the constituents who have more influence with legislators because they voted them into office.

What is Lobbying?

Lobbying is simply communicating your views on local, state, or national policy issues to your elected officials in a timely and effective manner. By doing so, you are making your voice heard and your concerns addressed (www.aorn.org, 2000). The purpose is to get a member of Congress to vote for you, your goal, or your cause (Ross, 1993).

Why Lobby?

If you don't look out for your interests and those of your patients, who will? If you are not involved in the political decision-making process, you may not like the decisions that are made without your input (www.aorn.org, 2000). Lobbying members of Congress to persuade them to pass specific legislation, make changes in proposed legislation, or undo legislation already on the books is central to our form of government (Ross, 2003).

How Do I Lobby?

For the private citizen, there are several methods of lobbying. These include face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, letters, or e-mails. Generally, the more personal the contact, the more effective. If you cannot meet with a legislator, a meeting with his/her legislative assistant is almost as good.

You can meet legislators either in Washington, DC, or in their local office by contacting the scheduler through the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and asking for the senator's and/or representative's office.

You may have many issues to discuss, but it is best to limit your agenda to no more than three separate topics. It is also a good idea to have a printed fact sheet per issue that you can leave with the legislator. Make sure to have copies for the legislative assistants and other staff members who often attend such meetings.

When telephoning your representative in Congress, be aware that staff members often take the calls. Ask to speak to the legislative assistant who handles the issue you want to discuss. After identifying yourself, it is helpful to have a script prepared that states the bill number as well as a list of the details you want to talk about. For example: "Please tell Senator/Representative [Name] that I support/oppose (S./H.R.)." It is also beneficial to state reasons for your support or opposition to the bill (www.nursingworld.org, 2001).

When writing to a member of Congress, remember a personal letter is more effective than a form letter. However, if you are short on time a form letter is certainly better than no correspondence at all. If you decide to write a letter, your purpose for writing should be stated in the first paragraph of the letter and you should identify the specific bill or piece of legislation up-front. Be courteous and to the point, and include key information using examples to support your position. Address only one issue per letter and if possible keep the letter to one page. Include your full name and address which identifies you as a constituent, along with your telephone number (www.nursingworld.org, 2001). When e-mailing, the same general guidelines apply as with writing a letter.

Tips on Lobbying Congress

1. Keep it short and to the point.
2. Don't forget to say "Thank you."
3. Get to know the legislator's staff. It is frequently more productive to speak to a staff member than the lawmakers themselves.
4. Tell the whole story by acknowledging when something is difficult and when there is opposition.
5. Timing is everything. It is important to know Congress procedures, so mention proper deadlines and don't ask for requests at the last minute.

Get to know the legislator's staff members. They are usually more accessible than the lawmaker and may be able to expedite your request.



6. Have a 1-page written draft of what you want available to leave or send to the legislator.
7. Be professional even when the answer is "No." Regroup and wait for another chance. (www.yourcongress.com, 2003).

Sources of Lobbying Information

If you have a burning interest in lobbying, there are resources available to provide additional information including a book written by veteran lobbyists Bruce C. Wolpe and Bertram L. Levine, *Lobbying Congress, How the System Works, 2nd Edition*. There are Web sites that offer e-mail alert systems that inform activists about federal bills that need action; they also suggest ways that make it easier to e-mail or contact your representatives. One such Web site is the National NOW Action Center, www.now.org. The Web site "Thomas" (named after Thomas Jefferson) located at <http://thomas.loc.gov> is an excellent source for research on current and recent bills (Stapleton-Gray, 2003).

The Power of Your Voice

Never underestimate the importance of what you have to say. As a professional, you bring a unique perspective to health care issues and often have intricate knowledge that helps provide insight for our country's lawmakers. It is also important that you lobby those members of Congress who may support your views as well as those who may not. Lobbying can change votes so it is important that you lobby the people who disagree with you. Lobbying supporters provides them with evidence that there are people out there backing their position and allows them to be more active in championing that position (<http://archive.aclu.org>, 2003).

As a professional nurse, your tools are your voice, power, knowledge, and vote. These tools are crucial to future health care legislation and they are most effective when used to influence policymaking. The best way to do this is by lobbying. Let's get busy.

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