

AMA Alliance Legislation Committee's TOP TEN WAYS to Become a More Effective Advocate

Only a small fraction of Americans engage in legislative advocacy to support issues that matter to them. Many Americans believe their voice won't be heard, or that their legislators don't really care what they think, or are afraid to do something that could harm their cause. They fear that they can't make a difference, so why bother?

The fact is that citizen advocacy does make a difference – but there are methods and strategies that work better than others to influence our elected officials. This guide, although far from comprehensive, identifies *TEN EASY STEPS* you can take to become a more effective advocate, even if you've never tried to impact legislation before. It isn't difficult and anyone can do it – so let's get started!

1.) **REGISTER TO VOTE - AND VOTE.** If you haven't already done so, register to vote. If you're not a registered voter, you don't really count as far as legislators are concerned.

a.) VOTE. In every election. Including Primaries. No excuses. (Vote absentee if there's any chance you won't be able to make it to the polls.)

b.) If you never miss a vote, you achieve highly coveted "super-voter" status. There is no more important constituent in your voting district, and elected officials at every level know it.

c.) Your legislators will not know how you voted, but easily accessible voter rolls will tell them instantly if they have to be worried about losing your support. If you don't vote, your request or opinion won't be on the top of anybody's priority list.

d.) If you are a "super voter" your calls and letters will be shifted to the top of the pile.

2.) **KNOW WHO YOUR LEGISLATORS ARE.** You can't influence or educate them if you can't identify them. AMA's Legislative Action Center helps you find out who your federal legislators are by simply entering your address at <http://www.capwiz.com/ama/home>. AMA's Patient Action Network offers an easy tool to find both your federal and state legislators, also by entering your address here: http://www.patientsactionnetwork.com/index.php?page_id=362. Your state medical society probably has a similar tool on its website. Here are the legislators you most need to be able to identify if you want to be an effective advocate:

At the Federal Level:

a.) Identify the two (2) United States Senators from your state. You'll have a long time to get to know them, because they serve longer than any other elected legislator - six years. There are only 100 of these, so they wield a lot of power, and every resident of your state is their constituent, regardless of political affiliation. When asked to contact your US Senators, you'll want to contact both of your state's US Senators, whether they share your political party or not.

b.) Identify your congressional district's Member of the House of Representatives. Congressional districts comprise between a half million and just under a million people, all of whom are that Representative's constituents, regardless of political affiliation. Every American has only one member of the 435 member House of Representatives representing him or her. These legislators are identified by their state and the number of their congressional district
EX: (Charles W. Dent, PA-15).

At the State Level:

a.) Identify your State Senator. The number of state senators varies from state to state. In PA, there are 50, each representing about 240,000 people. "Google" it for your state. You have only one state senator.

b.) Identify your member of the State House of Representatives or Assembly or whatever it's called in your state. These vary from state to state as well. In PA, for example, each State Representative serves about 60,000 people. Google it. You have only one of these.

3.) **GET TO KNOW YOUR LEGISLATORS.** Now that you know who they are it's time to get to know your legislators. There are many ways to do this, and most of them won't cost you a dime.

a.) Attend a Town Hall meeting. Virtually all legislators hold these in their home districts throughout the year, and schedules are posted publicly. Or you can ask the legislator's office to notify you about such events. At a meeting, if you get a chance, stand up, identify yourself, and ask a pertinent question about an issue that impacts health care. Hang around afterward to thank the legislator for addressing your concern. Give him or her your card and offer to provide more insight if needed. If you do this more than once, the legislator will get to know you. If you really want to make an impression, send a handwritten thank you note.

b.) Don't ignore the staffers who'll be with your legislator. Ask them for their cards and share yours. Treat them like partners in the process – because they are. Your legislators rely on them to keep them informed and focused. Sometimes, being friends with a staffer is as valuable as being friends with your legislator. Think of them as gatekeepers. Get their email addresses. In most cases, they read their own email, unlike the legislator, who likely has emails screened by staffers because there are too many.

c.) If your elected official is taking part in a public event, walk up and introduce yourself. Have a card handy. Many elected officials attend state and county medical society annual meetings or banquets. They're not there for the food - they're there to show support for and make contact with local doctors and their families. Make it worth their while to attend by giving them a chance to get to know you.

d.) Even if it isn't a health care-related event, even if it's something like a charity fundraiser, or a county fair, do a quick introduction. Every time you have "face time" with an elected official, you become more familiar. Do this often enough, and the legislator will begin to identify you with health care issues.

e.) Whenever you see your legislator outside of the office, remind him or her who you are, or how you met, or that you made contact about an issue recently. They have lots of constituents, and people assume that politicians have perfect recall. They don't, and they'll appreciate you not embarrassing them by making them guess who you are. Eventually, they will remember your name. But always offer it.

f.) Invite your legislator to a meeting of your Alliance or a joint meeting with your county medical society. Ask him or her to provide a legislative update, or talk about a specific issue. This allows your group to bond with the legislator over a common topic, and ensures that you and other members of your group will be remembered when you call about a legislative issue.

g.) To really make an impact, invite your legislator(s) to **participate** in a project your Alliance is doing in your county or state. Ask him or her to help present awards to science fair winners, or help your group do a presentation on reducing violence. The possibilities are endless. And the legislator will always remember that your group gave him or her an opportunity to participate in something important and to generate good will with other constituents. If your legislator participates in a project, your group will have the benefit of enhanced publicity through the legislator's own press staff. The media is far more likely to show up if there's an elected official available to them.

h.) You can attend a fundraising event for your legislator – or even better, throw one, in your home or another place. **However, this crosses the advocacy vs./political electioneering line, and you may not attend a fundraiser as a representative of the AMA Alliance.** As a private citizen, you are certainly able to do so, and your legislator will remember that you were there, not who you were representing at the time. This is the fine line where legislative advocacy morphs into political activism.

i.) It's OK – encouraged even – for Alliance members to engage in both legislative and political advocacy - but not at the same time. You must always be careful, due to the Alliance's federal tax exempt status, to not **tout your connection to the Alliance when you engage in any political activity.** It's also important to remember that nothing endears you to a legislator more than helping him or her get elected or re-elected, whether through your contributions or your volunteerism. So even though you are not representing the Alliance when you throw a fundraiser or stuff envelopes for your legislator who is a friend to medicine, that legislator will remember who helped out.

j.) This is important. Supporting or opposing a piece of legislation, or an issue which impacts medicine, is Legislative Advocacy and a key way for medical family members to influence health care. The Alliance engages in issues advocacy, supporting or opposing legislation. This is always cool and you should stress your Alliance connection when you do it. But supporting or opposing a candidate or political party is political activism (campaigning or electioneering), and it is important you not identify as an AMA Alliance member in this situation.

4.) **ARRANGE A PERSONAL MEETING.** A face to face meeting in the legislator's office is the **most effective method** to "reach" your legislator. It's not difficult to arrange one of these. Always remember that it's your legislators' job and responsibility to talk with you, his or her constituent.

a.) First, decide if you'd like to meet in the Capitol or one of the legislator's district offices. Sometimes it's easier to meet with your legislator when he or she is "home" in the district office because there are fewer distractions (like votes) and fewer groups seeking face time. Also, legislators tend to focus more on local issues and the needs of constituents in their district offices.

b.) When you call for the appointment, identify yourself as a constituent, and if appropriate, mention the group you represent, and let the scheduler know what you'd like to discuss. If more than one person is attending the meeting, make sure to provide the number of people and their names as a courtesy (some offices will require this). Ask if you'll be meeting with the legislator or a staff person.

c.) If your state medical society or Alliance holds a Day at the Capitol in your state, make every effort to attend. Make sure that you have advance arrangements to meet with your state representative and senator. Your state's government affairs office or political action committee can help with this. Going as a group the first few times makes it easier, although legislators are accustomed to "newbies" coming to their offices, and will help you to steer the conversation. Don't stay too long – even if the legislator doesn't seem to be in a hurry for you to leave. They're busy people, and just as we want to take a few minutes of their time, so do many others. You can also participate in the AMA's annual National Advocacy Conference if you want to focus on health care issues at the national level. This is well worth the cost for the outstanding educational sessions and an organized opportunity to meet with your member of Congress during a time when he or she is focused on health care issues because they know the AMA conference is taking place. Information about the NAC is available on the Alliance website.

d.) Make sure to introduce yourself and anyone with you in the context of the meeting. EX: "Hi, I'm Donna Rovito. Thanks for making time to meet with us today. I'm one of your constituents from Allentown, and my husband Peter is a surgeon at Lehigh Valley Hospital. This is Cinny Parrish – she's one of your new constituents from Hershey. She's a physical therapist and her husband is an orthopaedic surgeon at Hershey Medical Center. We're in town for the AMA's National Advocacy Conference and we wanted to touch base with you about some issues that impact health care today."

e.) Know what you want to talk about. Don't bring a script, but have some talking points in your head or in a notebook. After exchanging greetings, get to the point of the meeting. Your legislator is a busy person, and will appreciate not having too much time wasted on small talk. Plus, your time will be limited and you'll want to focus on the reason you're there.

f.) Always bring something you can leave behind. Keep it short and to the point – and be as creative as possible. Make sure to identify yourself and your organization, provide contact information, and note that you're available with more information if needed.

g.) Some veteran advocates are comfortable "walking the halls" of their state Capitol – or even the House and Senate office buildings in Washington, in effect "cold calling" legislators' offices on specific legislation. If you do this, make sure to have something to leave behind – and be aware that creativity helps. (EX: "Good afternoon. We represent our state's medical society Alliance and we're in the Capitol today to ask our legislators to help reduce traffic fatalities by NOT repealing our state's motorcycle helmet law. We brought this miniature motorcycle helmet filled with life savers for your desk, because we believe that helmets are life savers for our friends and family who ride motorcycles.") Keep in mind, if you decide to do this, that your visit will mean more in your own legislators' offices.

h.) After your meeting, always send a Thank You note. A handwritten one will be noticed, but if you already know your legislator and have a private email address, it's OK to email. You'll probably get a thank you letter from your legislator, thanking you for meeting with him or her. And who knows, this could be the beginning of a beautiful relationship....

5.) **SEND A PERSONAL NOTE OR LETTER.** Handwritten notes are rare today, so yours will be noticed far more than the emails or boilerplate issue letters many groups organize.

a.) A typed and signed personal letter on your personal letterhead is almost as effective as a handwritten note. Always sign these personally, and add a quick extra line if you can.

b.) If you really want your message to stand out, send it to the legislator's office certified and registered. Sure, it costs a few bucks, but you will be guaranteed that someone signs for it and opens it – because who doesn't open certified mail immediately?

c.) Sometimes it's more effective to send mail to the legislators' district offices. At state capitols and especially the US Capitol, there are rigorous mail screenings for security purposes, which delay mail delivery. If your request for support or opposition is about a vote which will take place soon, the district office may be your best bet. Keep in mind, too, that district offices receive less mail, so there's more chance that someone in a higher position of authority will read it, and that it will be passed on more quickly, especially if you've done your homework and become known in that office.

d.) Don't send 10 rambling pages of "important information" or newspaper clippings or links to articles the legislator will never read. Just like us, legislators have limited time and attention spans. Make a maximum of two points in your letter, ask the legislator to do what you want, thank him or her for the time and consideration and past support, and close. Most importantly, make your request for support or opposition in a clear and succinct manner.

e.) Use a bill name or number whenever possible, or make it clear what legislation you're talking about in the first sentence. (EX: "Dear Rep. Dent: Please help to ensure that our seniors have timely access to medical care by supporting the repeal of the flawed SGR formula when it comes up in your committee.")

f.) Take the "personal" part of "personal letter" seriously. Tell the legislator how the proposed legislation affects you, your medical family, or your patients. They get thousands of requests for action on legislation – make yours stand out by making it personal. (EX: "Dear Sen. Browne: I am seven years old, and my mom always makes me wear a helmet when I ride my bike. I don't like it, and it makes my head sweat, but she says it keeps me safe in case I fall. Motorcycles go a lot faster than my bike, and people can get hurt a lot more, so please vote no to repeal Pennsylvania's motorcycle helmet law.")

6.) **SEND PREPAID U.S. POST CARDS ON SPECIFIC ISSUES OR LEGISLATION.** This is an easy and inexpensive way to generate lots of "personal" communications.

a.) Buy a package of prepaid post cards at the post office. A printed blank stamped card from USPS is \$.37 and they come in packages of 100 for \$37.00. These are quick and easy to use.

b.) Take the pack to a meeting of your Alliance, or any group in which you participate.

c.) Prior to the meeting, research the number or name of the bill you'd like to influence, as well as the mailing addresses of the state or federal legislators you want to reach. In some cases, if your group covers a large geographical area, you may need addresses for several legislators. You can print the information, put it on a slide to project, or just be prepared to read it several times.

d.) Explain the legislation, and ask each member to address the post card to his or her own legislator. If someone doesn't know, use websites or apps to help them.

e.) Ask each member to request the legislator's support (or opposition) to the specific piece of legislation in one or two short sentences, and then sign his or her name.

f.) Put personal addresses and phone numbers under the signature, so the legislator can make contact if needed. This also ensures that the legislator knows the writer is a constituent.

g.) This is the most important part – collect the completed cards and drop them into a mail box right after you leave. This ensures that they're not forgotten, and that the legislator will receive a large number of individually written pieces of mail about the legislation you support or oppose.

7.) **MAKE PHONE CALLS.** These are all logged, counted and do make a difference.

a.) Decide between calling the Capitol or District office. Be aware that the main offices in your state Capitol or Washington receive far more calls.

b.) Legislators' phone numbers are readily available through a variety of online sources, including the AMA website, your state medical society's website, and even through phone apps.

c.) You probably won't talk directly to your legislator, but that's OK. Whoever answers the phone is keeping a log of calls. First, identify yourself as a constituent.

d.) Very clearly state the purpose of your call. (EX: “Good morning! My name is Donna Rovito, and I live in Rep. Dent’s district. I’m calling today to ask Rep. Dent to support repealing the flawed SGR formula for physician Medicare reimbursements.”)

e.) You may be asked for more information, or the person who answered the phone may tell you where your legislator stands on that issue. Or not. It’s OK for you to ask if the legislator has already taken a position on the issue. If you’re told the legislator is on the other side, it’s OK to say that you’d appreciate if he or she would take another look at the issue and reconsider his or her position.

f.) Be assured that even if the conversation only takes a moment, your request or opinion will be logged. And counted. And reported to the legislator at the end of each and every day. Some legislators can tell you exactly how many calls or letters they’ve received on a specific issue.

g.) Conversely, all legislators know if they have not received calls or letters on a specific issue, and may vote accordingly.

h.) If you’ve created a strong enough relationship that you have your legislator’s personal phone number and know you’re welcome to call, GREAT! But don’t use it too often. Some legislators will even respond to text messages from constituents, just don’t abuse the privilege.

i.) Once in a while, call or write just to say “thank you” for past support.

8.) **EMAIL** We know that legislators at every level get thousands of emails. So they count, but, frankly, they don’t count as much as other forms of communication, just because there are so many of them and it’s so easy for advocacy groups to create email blasts in support or opposition to a bill.

a.) An exception to this is if you know your legislator or a member of his or her staff personally, and you have a private email address. Then, by all means, use this for timely communication.

b.) The AMA, state medical societies, and other organizations have online tools to create “personalized” emails to legislators and will even deliver them for you. If you don’t have time to do anything else, this is better than nothing.

c.) Most legislators have an online email tool embedded in their official website. While this is better than nothing, having a direct email address to a staffer is probably more effective than using the online tool, which is likely vetted by an intern or other low level staffer. Your message will be counted.

9.) **MAKE YOUR COMMUNICATION COUNT.** Not only are your letters, calls, and emails logged and counted – they actually count as more than one communication.

a.) Since legislators know that most of their constituents won’t take the time to write or call, they multiply your communication by a factor appropriate to the size of their constituency – generally at least ten. So your note or call is considered to be the opinion of as many as TEN constituents.

b.) Although every communication is logged and counted, there are “priority piles.”

c.) If you’re not a constituent, don’t waste your time because your letter or call won’t land in a “priority pile.” Legislators are most interested in what the people who can vote for them think. So if you won’t be on the “constituent” pile, don’t bother. (Unless you personally or professionally know a legislator from another district and you know your name will be recognized.) Some legislators’ online email tools won’t even accept email from someone who isn’t in their own district.

d.) Voters get priority attention. Non-voters...well, legislators don’t really care what non-voters think. Assume that they’ll check. If you’re not registered or haven’t voted in 20 years, you probably shouldn’t waste your time making contact. But both of those conditions are easy to remedy! (See #1.)

e.) Personal friends, supporters, and contributors get extra and more timely attention. For how to become one of those, see #3 - **GET TO KNOW YOUR LEGISLATORS.**

10.) **INCREASE YOUR ADVOCACY CLOUD.** There are lots of ways to increase your effectiveness by simply increasing the number of people you engage in your legislative advocacy efforts.

a.) Ask 10 friends, or family members, or office staff to make a call or write a letter and you can increase your impact tenfold. You can mine your holiday card list for contacts for important issues.

- b.) Reach out to your county or state medical Alliance, or other organizations through email, text messages or social media like Facebook and Twitter and you can increase your impact a hundred-fold.
- c.) Distribute flyers about important legislative issues through physicians' offices (with permission, of course), or in waiting rooms or lounges, and you can increase your impact a thousand-fold.
- d.) Create an email list of people who share your interest in advocacy for quality health care and send out email alerts with all pertinent information, including contact information or a link to a website or electronic tool which will easily provide contact information when you'd like them to take action.
- e.) Pass along email alerts from the AMA Alliance and your state Alliance.
- f.) Share your passion for legislative advocacy with everyone you know. Most people think their voices aren't heard or their opinions don't count. If you share a story about how you or your group did make a difference, it will encourage others to get involved, to make that first phone call or send that first letter. It does make a difference.
- g.) Mentor a "newbie." It's a little intimidating to visit a legislator for the first time – so offer to accompany someone, or help write that first letter. It will help to increase their comfort zone and enable future advocacy to everyone's benefit.
- h.) If you are a "newbie," ask someone to join you for a meeting or point you in the right direction. There are many people in the Alliance who will be thrilled to do so.
- i.) Social media is a powerful advocacy tool. Post information on your personal Facebook page about legislation you support or oppose. Provide the information your "friends" need to make the calls or send the letters you're requesting. Find an article about the legislation and link to it.
- j.) Post specific legislative action requests on your Alliance Facebook page. If your Alliance doesn't have a Facebook page, create one. It's free and easy. Remember the rules about "lobbying vs. electioneering/campaigning". If you need help deciding about this issue for a posting, or you have other questions, contact the AMA Alliance's Legislation Committee – use the Member's Directory or admin@amaalliance.org. "Share" posts from the AMA Alliance FB page (which is coordinated through the AMA Alliance Legislation Committee). "Share" information from your local and state medical society, or from the AMA, or other health-oriented pages you "like."
- k.) TWEET your requests for legislative action – make sure to provide a link with additional information people will need.
- l.) Utilize other social media to generate additional advocacy when appropriate. Consider the social community you'll reach before posting specific health issue advocacy information.
- m.) Join your state's PAC (Political Action Committee) and AMPAC (American Medical Political Action Committee). Even a small contribution helps to ensure that "friends of medicine" are elected – and it's far easier to persuade someone who already shares your perspective on health care issues to support or oppose your legislation than someone who does not.
- n.) Get involved with medical specialty societies or other organizations focused on health care issues. These are excellent places to build a network of people who share your passion about health care.

Obviously, no one can do everything listed in this guide. But if you, or your Alliance, choose one or several you can make a difference, even if you've never engaged in legislative advocacy before.

Congratulations! You will be well on your way to becoming an effective advocate !

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