

Lobbying Advice from the Inside

By Iowa State Representative Linda Upmeyer, NP

I recently completed my first session as a representative in the Iowa Legislature and am eager to share what I learned to better prepare others to shape public policy. As the former chairwoman of the Iowa Nurses Association's political action committee, I once thought getting the attention of legislators was best done with a check — good contributions from citizens and associations. As legislator, I learned that is partly true, but only partly. Campaigns are expensive, and legislators appreciate financial support. Yet, when I think of the people who influenced me most during the past legislative session, that influence wasn't based on contributions; it was based on the people and the stories they told me.

Get to Know Your Legislators

The most effective way to influence policy is to meet with your legislators before the session begins. Tell them who you are — both personally and professionally. If I speak with someone face to face, I am more likely to understand an issue, ask questions and discuss the best course of action to take. Make good use of our time. Remember, there are dozens of folks wanting time to discuss issues, and for even the best legislator, there are only so many hours in a day. One of the good things about Iowa's system is that we are citizen legislators. That means most of us have other jobs, and after the session ends, we go back to our professions. Whenever possible, put together a group with common interests and discuss the issue over a cup of coffee. You have an advantage over professional lobbyists: You can personalize issues.

Even if your legislative agenda has yet to be set, take the opportunity to get to know your legislators. Then, when you do need to discuss a bill, your legislators have a frame of reference for who you are and what you care about. Remember: All politics is local. Get to know your representatives!

Share Stories and Solutions

Legislators may respond to your message in a variety of ways. They may disagree and, at times, even act hostile. They may seem indifferent. Or, they may strongly agree and become your advocate. I worked very hard on several pieces of health care legislation over the past two years. Often, I got involved because someone took the time to approach me with a problem and offered an idea about how to improve the situation. This tactic induced my passion. When constituents convinced me, I poured my heart into advocating change to my colleagues.

Speak Clearly and Completely

When discussing an issue, use terms legislators understand. Cut to the chase by offering the clearest, simplest explanation possible. Many issues compete for legislators' attention, and their eyes may glaze over if a topic becomes too laborious. While many legislators are good talkers, not all are good listeners. Be sensitive to their attention span. If you sense it is not a good time to receive their full attention, reschedule the appointment. Never lie or mislead, and always provide sound information. Present both sides of an issue. If you present only the positive aspects of your cause, your opposition will be free to fill in the holes with all kinds of gloom-and-doom details. Instead, defuse the negatives yourself. Let legislators know who might oppose the issue and why. If you build a relationship based on trust, you will be heard. If legislators don't consider you trustworthy, they will avoid you like the plague.

Offer Your Expertise

Over the last year, I've come to the startling realization that many legislators do not know a nurse practitioner from a registered nurse, licensed practical nurse or physician assistant. We need to continue educating on health topics so lawmakers know they can come to us for advice on health care issues. Most lawmakers will appreciate your offer to help. No legislator can be expert in all areas. We rely on the experts in our districts to help us out. Lobbying is advocating, educating and caring.

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