

Political Presence: APA Values of Advocacy and Leadership

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Kenneth G. Busch MD (shown here with Meryl Sosa and Congressman Danny Davis (IL-7th)) is an Assembly Representative from the Illinois Psychiatric Society. His interests include public policy making at state and national levels. He has worked on political strategy for Congressional campaigns and he is currently Chair of the Health Care Advisory Council for Congressman Mike Quigley (IL-5th) and Mental Health Advisory Committee for Congressman Davis . This is his 3rd article sharing insights on timely political topics for the Assembly.

It is a particular challenge to understand how organized interest groups such as APA can influence members of Congress. By creating venues for political participation, membership advocacy associations provide constituents a way to express their priorities in political settings. This was very apparent during the visit on Capitol Hill with 2011 APA Advocacy Day.

We were one of many groups eager to meet with members of Congress and their Staff in the House and Senate office buildings. We observed other citizen lobbyists seeking the political time and attention from Congressional offices. They were members of the Farmers Union, Council on Aging, New York Police Department, and American Hospital Association. The men and women from NYPD specifically stood out in prominent blue uniforms, which was in stark contrast to the dark black suits and starched white shirts worn by other groups.

Why are some associations better than others in achieving political presence in Washington? Many research studies have focused on traditional tactics that groups use to promote their political agenda. The most common type is the direct lobbying technique by volunteer constituents to meet with members of Congress and Staff. This type of lobbying was observed on the Hill during APA Advocacy Day. Several factors can influence this process such as the nature of the group, coalitions with other organizations, opponents' strategies, priorities of legislators, and cooperation with Staff from Congressional offices. In-house full time lobbyists (APA Department of Government Relations) can later follow-up to pursue the goals of the group.

Members of Congress and their staff are always busy meeting with constituent groups. Policy initiatives in Congress have multiple determinants. They include the political realities involved with a particular policy initiative as well as party affiliation and party platform and the expertise and interest by the individual member of Congress. For example, one of the staffers during Advocacy Day reported that the Congressman was most interested in the expansion of trauma centers across the country. This member of Congress was influenced by a family member who

was seriously ill and not treated at the local emergency room. This tragedy resulted in his death. As a result the Congressman's main priority was to establish a work group to draft legislation and implement policy interventions to increase access to care at hospital emergency rooms. I told the Staffer a personal story about a similar situation in my own family. I offered my assistance to organize a work group for the Congressman with colleagues. The Staff member was very pleased about my concerns for the Congressman and then she listened enthusiastically to other APA matters.

Another staffer reported that constituent meetings and their priorities begin to blur after a while. There is limited time for the Congressman to be briefed after the meetings. The most important part of Advocacy Day according to the Staffer is the follow-up. Lobbying is regarded by Staff as a special relationship with the individual member of Congress. Close relationships must be built with key players on the Hill throughout the year to bring policy proposals for consideration.

It was very satisfying to participate with so many APA leaders during Advocacy Day. We create and maintain political bridges by our presence of on Capitol Hill. We were keeping Congressional offices well-informed and educated about APA priorities.

Membership associations and organized interest groups play an important role in American democracy by advocating for the greater good. Leaders must find innovative ways to achieve political purpose and common effort. It is a special privilege to be part of this process.