



# A PHYSICIAN’S GUIDE To Influencing Health Policy

Citizen participation is key to the democratic process. As a physician, your role in this process is critical and unique. Physician involvement demonstrates to decision makers that a public health problem exists. Physicians are seen as experts, community leaders, and purveyors of public health and medical science.

The MMA wants to thank you for your interest and willingness to become active at the local level. The MMA is committed to making your involvement as easy as possible.

You won’t have to “go it alone.” The MMA has staff on board, such as grassroots managers and coordinators, to support you with information, guidance and training.

*“All politics is local.”*

— Former House Speaker  
“Tip” O’Neill

Robert K. Meiches, M.D.  
CEO, Minnesota Medical Association

## Grassroots and ‘Grasstops’ Advocacy

Advocacy, simply put, is the application of pressure on the people and institutions that have the power to give you what you want.

*Grassroots advocacy* is a “bottom up” approach to social change that utilizes real people from the community to shape public policy, rather than paid staff or lobbyists. Grassroots advocates have a special power relationship with elected officials because, as voters, they have the power to hire and fire lawmakers. Grassroots advocacy harnesses the power of effective one-on-one relationships multiplied over and over. So the goal of any grassroots program is to build a critical mass of supporters—the more the better. This is called “building a base.”

A *grasstops advocate* is an advocate who has an even higher level of influence on a lawmaker because of his/her position and credentials or because of their personal relationships with the lawmaker. Additionally, grasstops advocates are very often

developed into media spokespersons for the larger effort and are often called upon to assist in the recruiting and training of new grassroots members.

As a grassroots advocate for the MMA, your level of participation can range from simply becoming informed on an issue and attending a training session, through meeting with your elected official and providing testimony at a public hearing. Also, you can encourage your colleagues, family, friends and even your patients to join you in your efforts.

How do grassroots advocates work with coalitions? A *coalition* is an alliance of groups organized for a common purpose or cause. Lobbyists and grassroots professionals alike will tell you the same thing: whenever possible, work with like-minded local organizations. Just as there is strength in the actions of many individuals, an organized coalition is even more prepared to influence public policy than a single grassroots group working by itself.

*Physicians, by virtue of their expertise, are instant “grasstops” in public health policy campaigns.*

# Politics and Medicine are Different!

For many people, the public arena can be intimidating and uncomfortable. Physicians are no exception. The combination of unfamiliarity with the process or system, physicians' own time constraints, and the slow, deliberative nature of the policy process often leads physicians to frustration and lack of interest.

After all, physicians are science-minded individuals who solve the many ailments presented by their patients every day. The time from diagnosis to treatment intervention can be relatively brief compared to the slow crawl of identifying a public health concern and passing a law.

## HOW ELECTED OFFICIALS THINK

When it comes to matters of health, you are the specialist and the lawmaker is a generalist. They don't need to know everything you know about a particular issue – they just need to know enough to be convinced to take action. You may help persuade them if you keep in mind that a lawmaker is often guided by these four questions:

- Does this make sense?
- How does this affect my district?
- Will it help or hurt me politically?
- Does anyone back home know or care about this issue?

*Politicians ask, Does this make sense? Does this affect my district? Does it help or hurt? Does anyone back home care?*

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Getting to know your elected official can quickly turn off physicians and other advocates. But chances are, you already know them through your community affiliations. An elected official may be a member of your health club, community organization, church, or sports program. Maybe your kids go to the same school. Even if you don't "know them," you live in the same world.

Capitalizing on these common experiences can be extremely useful because they create a natural bond between you.

- *Meet with your decision maker locally.* This will afford you the time and opportunity to educate your decision maker about your issues.
- *Attend your decision makers' events and town-hall meetings.* Ask your decision maker to add you to their mailing or email list to learn of upcoming events.
- *Communicate with your decision maker often.* Decision makers often only hear from constituents right before the scheduled vote. Be sure to write, call or email your decision maker throughout the year. If your decision maker is supportive, be sure to include words of thanks.

# Reaching out to local officials requires clarity and facts, but also a healthy respect for the work they are elected to do

## EMAILING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

Email can be an effective way to communicate with lawmakers if they are email savvy and if a relationship already exists. Here are some tips to make your emails more effective:

- State your request concisely.
- Provide personal examples and local context. If you are sending a generic form email, written by someone else, use personal examples to "keep it real."
- Persuade a like-minded friend, family member, or colleague to send an email as well. Public officials pay attention when many constituents write about an issue.

## CALLING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

Making a phone call to your elected official is quick, easy, and can be done at a moment's notice, making it an attractive method of contact. For these same reasons, it is critical that the phone call be effective. You don't need to be an expert on the issue to be persuasive; you just need to give your personal perspective. Here are some guidelines for making the call:

- *Plan.* Before you make the call, plan what you are going to say. Your phone call will be very brief, so keep your message simple and to the point. Practice making your case in as few words as possible.
- *Message.* After identifying your request, think about a key point or personal story that supports your position.
- *Time and place.* Many elected officials have other full-time employment. If possible, call your elected officials when they are home or at the public office phone number. Generally, do not call them at their place of employment.
- *Staff or Message.* You may have to speak to a staff person (if available) or leave a message. Make sure you get the staff person's first name. Always treat staff with respect.
- *Constituent.* Begin by stating that you are a constituent and give your street address. If you voted for the official, mention that as well.
- *Persuade.* State your reason for the call. Try to get the public official to state their position on the issue, and try to persuade them using the points you developed.
- *Recruit.* Recruit a like-minded friend, family member, or colleague to make a call as well. Particularly if the support seems weak and the official could use a little more encouraging.

## MEETING WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

A face-to-face meeting with your elected official can be a powerful way to advance your agenda. The meeting can also position you as a reliable expert on public health issues and an important ally for your local elected official—if it's done right. Follow these steps for a successful visit:

- *Plan your meeting.* If you go with a group, decide who is going to lead the meeting, and what each person will contribute to the discussion. This will help eliminate awkward silences or repetitive messages. And it will ensure that you hit all the key points you want to cover. You may have only 10 minutes for your meeting, so plan accordingly.
- *Know your audience.* Do a little research about your public official. Find out his or her positions on your issue.
- *If there are multiple issues* that are important to you, select one to discuss for that meeting. Attempting to address multiple issues dilutes your impact on each issue.
- *Define your message.* Focus your comments on one issue. Then plan two or three observations or arguments that get at the heart of your position.
- *Be flexible.* Don't be surprised if your appointment changes. Public officials often have last-minute hearings or other events.
- *Once you're in the door,* begin by finding something personal that you have in common with the public official. Do you live on the same street? Are your kids at the same school? Does something in the office suggest an interest that you share -- fishing, sports, or art? A little small talk breaks the ice—but keep it brief!
- *State your case.* Keep it concise, focused, and personal.
- *Invite comments and questions.* Engage them in dialogue. Don't worry if you don't have the answer to a question – use it as a chance to get back to them.
- *Ask for a commitment.* If you don't ask for action, you won't get any. If they decline, encourage them to think about it, and let them know you'll keep in touch.
- *Have a leave-behind,* a brief written statement (one-page, max) on the issue you discussed.
- *Visit more than once.* Over time, continue to discuss the issue and make requests. Be a reliable source for them by delivering what you promise, avoiding overstatement, and communicating clearly.

## Signs of an ace communicator

- You keep it short.
- You remind representatives that you are a constituent. It's their job to hear you out.
- You avoid medical jargon, relying on everyday English.
- You keep it real by telling your own stories.
- You follow up every communication – with a phone call, an email, or a note.
- You report back. If you are working with the MMA or any other organization, let them know who you talked to and what you said.
- You always say "Thank you" when it's over.

## WRITING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

Writing a letter to your legislator allows you to give more information than a phone call, and often to have greater impact than an email. Consider following your letter with a phone call or a visit for more interaction. Follow these basic steps for writing your letter:

- *Personalize your letter.* Handwritten letters have the most impact. If you are basing your letter on a grassroots form letter, rewrite it, or at least retype it. Photocopies of generic letters don't cut it. Use personal examples and share your story.
- *Use the news.* News stories can illustrate your point.
- *Local, local, local!* Make a strong connection between the issues and your local community that the elected official represents.
- *If elected officials supported* your issues in the past, acknowledge and give reasons why they should continue their support.
- *Have a like-minded friend,* family member, or colleague write as well. Elected officials listen when many constituents speak out on an issue.
- *Communicate more than once.* One letter will not seal the deal.

# Know the ways that messages fail – then take steps to avoid them.

## YOUR MESSAGE

The obvious places to speak out are one-to-one conversations with your patients, in discussions at your clinic, and in presentations to associations and extended networks.

The first step in developing your message is asking yourself the following question: “What gets me what I want?” Keep the following points in mind:

- *Address your strengths.* As a physician you are automatically an assumed expert on public health and medical science. So stick to the public health aspects of your message.
- *Understand and defuse arguments.* Anticipating the opposition’s claims or countering an assertion can be an effective strategy for neutralizing their arguments. But it should not be the sole focus of your message. As a general rule, devote no more than 20 percent of your message to arguing.
- *Consider your audience.* Your message will be different if you are addressing a patient one-on-one, a gymnasium full of school aged children, or a county board of commissioners.
- *Don’t overwhelm people with the facts.* And avoid medical jargon – language ordinary people don’t understand.

## THE PHYSICIAN SPOKESPERSON

Almost any health group would love to have a physician for a spokesperson. The best physician spokesperson is someone who has already mastered the many aspects of the grassroots program. The physician will be fully informed on the medical science, political considerations, opposition, and many other nuances of the issue. Physician spokespersons are always refining their craft. Becoming an effective physician spokesperson is a learned skill.

## COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC

Communicating directly with the public can be very different from building a relationship or communicating with your elected official. When communicating with the general public there is less room for error. The message you deliver must be intentional, strategic, and precise. This requires planning, preparation, practice, and persistence.

Always begin by creating a communications plan. Start by gathering the “players” or members of your coalition or organized group. Consider your target audience and determine which media work best for your message and why. Also, decide whether to use paid media or earned media.

- **Paid Media**—is coverage for a fee that your issue group or coalition buys from vendors.
- **Earned Media**—is free coverage that your issue group or coalition receives or “earns.”

## WRITING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

An underused resource in grassroots advocacy is the local media. Often these neighborhood weeklies and smaller papers have more room for letters, and they have high readership. Letters to the editor can be powerful vehicles for influencing both public opinion and elected officials. The general public and elected officials read the opinion page for the same reason: to identify issues and gauge public opinion. The trick is to write a letter that editors find compelling enough to print. Physicians often have an automatic advantage in this area because the titles doctor and M.D. convey automatic credibility.

Use these tips to write a letter that is more likely to get printed:

- *Look for opportunities.* If there is a new health study, can it be tied to your issue? Refer to the recent event, then quickly build a logical bridge to your issue.
- *Keep it brief.* There is a difference between a letter to the editor, an op-ed, and a guest column. Each paper has different rules; learn them.
- *Be clear.* Avoid medical jargon, use common vocabulary, and let someone review the letter for you before you send it.
- *Include a call to action* or solution. If you are illustrating a need or making a case for a specific action, include a line about what people can do to help.
- *Be passionate*, but not poisonous. There is a difference between “fire in the belly” and righteous indignation. Avoid sarcasm. If you’re angry, cool off before sending a final version.
- *Use personal stories* about patient experiences without revealing their identities. Speaking on behalf of your patients is extremely effective with lawmakers.

# Speaking your mind in public takes courage and preparation

## THE PUBLIC HEARING PROCESS

Throughout Minnesota the process and procedures for advancing public policy vary by locality. Most public officials realize that few citizens understand these rules. Often the chairperson will inform the public at the beginning of the meeting about procedures, general decorum, and the agenda.

Here are a few quick tips:

- *Time limit.* Respect any time limit imposed for individual testimony.
- *Talk through the chair.* It may be necessary to address your comments through the chair of the council or board. For example, you would start, “Mr. / Madam Chair, members of the board...”
- *Crowd control.* Often during public testimony or an open forum there will be an attempt by the council/board to control an unruly crowd. You may be asked to refrain from either cheering or jeering.

At any public event, be aware that rules are in place, and observe them. Generally, rely on the public official or community organizer to help you navigate the process.

## PROVIDING TESTIMONY AT PUBLIC HEARINGS

Testifying at a public hearing, before a city council or a county board, the line begins to blur between communicating with an elected official and communicating with a much larger public audience. In this sense, it is important to realize there are two audiences, the public official and the general public via the media. Remember that you are on the record. Public hearings or open forums generally precede more formal actions, such as a final vote from the board. Most elected officials will keep an open mind but usually have already decided their vote and that decision can be based on who has been in contact with them preceding the vote. Follow these steps for successfully providing testimony at public hearings:

- *Before the meeting.* Briefly reconnect with your elected officials. Quickly remind them of your support or opposition.
- *Testify.*

- Address the elected officials directly, thanking them for the opportunity to be heard.
- Immediately introduce yourself and state your address or the location of your clinic (if in the area).
- Once you have established your constituency, proceed quickly to your testimony.
- State whether you support or oppose the policy under consideration.
- Then briefly state your three or four top arguments.
- Avoid use of medical terms and descriptions not easily understood by the layperson.
- Tell your story! Relating your experiences with your patients is extremely valuable.
- Stick to your public health message. Do not devote more than 20 percent of your testimony to refuting others.
- *Remember you are on the record.* Anything you say at a public hearing is part of the public record. Many public hearings record the audio and sometimes video of their meetings for purposes of a historical record. Do not overstate your case. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so and promise to find out.
- *Be ready to be refuted.* Opponents may present nonscientific information as fact. You may be publicly repudiated. Don’t take it personally. There’s no need to respond to such attacks. The more over the top your opposition goes, the less effective they will be.

*Truth is,  
lawmakers are  
most likely to  
remember your  
personal story.*



# If one doctor is credible, two or three (or four) are unbeatable.

## TELLING YOUR STORY (PEER LEADERSHIP)

Peer leadership is a valuable alternative to a more visible public role, like being a spokesperson. Peer leadership is an important tool for physicians. Physician-to-physician presentations that role-model the benefits of taking action are very effective recruiting strategies.

## RECRUITING OTHER PHYSICIANS

Physicians have many barriers to becoming more involved in campaigns for public health issues. However, when physicians are involved early and often, they can make the difference between failure and success. This section briefly addresses some of those barriers.

### ROADBLOCK

### REMOVAL

#### Time

“There aren’t enough hours in the day for me to see patients, be part of my family, and moonlight as a grassroots activist!”

Then do small things. Write a letter to the editor. Attend a single meeting. Make a phone call. The MMA can get you involved in the least obtrusive way.

#### Need to be Experts

“I’m a doctor! I don’t want to speak out on an issue until I have all my bases covered!”

Yes, you need to know the topic at hand. But you only need to know how it affects patients’ health. There is room for physicians with every level of issue expertise.

#### Focus on the Individual

“I prefer to focus my time helping individuals.”

Physicians who have worked on public health campaigns will tell you they were able to help many more people.

#### Health System

“I don’t want to make waves. My clinic doesn’t want me spouting off.”

Your system will often give you leeway if they know you are working with the MMA.

#### Inappropriate

“Doctors shouldn’t get involved in policy squabbles.”

Who is more qualified to discuss issues of public health than physicians? Can they justify not speaking out?

#### Lack of Training

“I don’t know the first thing about speaking about health policy.”

The MMA can provide both the “how to” advocacy training and a review of the science on most public health issues.

#### Apathy with the Process

“The policy process is too bureaucratic. Nothing ever gets done.”

Even though the political process is cumbersome and sometimes ineffectual, sooner or later something is going to happen, whether physicians are involved or not. If you are not at the table, you are on the menu.

*Sharing your experiences shows other physicians they can get involved, they can make a difference.*

# Keeping your cool when all around you are losing theirs

## DEFUSING THE OPPOSITION

As you step from your usual environment into the public arena, where the issues are personal and the participants are passionate, you are likely to encounter organized opposition. Opposition awareness is essential to any grassroots campaign.

Here are some quick tips to getting to know your opposition:

- *Learn the Players.* Who is the head of their association? Who are their most active members? Read their minutes, or any standing resolutions, if they publish them. Look for board lists, recent pictures, membership lists, or references to how many people they represent.
- *Power Relationships.* Identify any relationships they have with public officials. Is the mayor their best friend?
- *Public hearings.* Public hearings are a great place to learn and understand your opponents’ arguments, messaging, tactics, and delivery. Make sure you listen intently to opposition. Write down their names and associations, and make a quick list of their main points. Note which points were most effective for their purposes and what message delivery method worked better than others.

Once you have learned who your opposition is and what their methods are, you will quickly discover that one of their main tactics is to get you pulled off topic. If they are successful in pulling you off your message—they win! Fortunately, there are two tools that can be used in response to this opposition tactic: re-framing and pivoting.

*If you are being opposed for telling the truth in the public policy process, you must be doing something right.*

## REFRAMING EXAMPLE: PHYSICIAN PAYMENT REFORM DEBATE

*Re-framing* is a response tactic that can be used when your opposition or challenger frames the context of their argument or question, so as to shed a positive light on themselves and pin you down with that created context.

*Elected official framing:* “Doctor, are you asking us to take an already unbalanced budget and adjust it to include higher payments for physicians caring for needy Minnesotans?”

*Physician re-framing:* “Senator/Representative, the state’s payments for these assistance programs simply does not cover the cost of care for the enrollees. Minnesota’s physicians are paid significantly less for these services than the other states in the region and many smaller clinics may not be able to stay open if the underpayment continues.”

## PIVOTING EXAMPLE: PHYSICIAN PAYMENT REFORM DEBATE

*Pivoting* is a non-response tactic to a direct question about a particular opposition issue. Whereas with reframing you are re-crafting the context to suit your needs, pivoting is different in that it ultimately does not directly address the initial prompt.

*News reporter:* “According to Forbes magazine, physicians are already some of the highest paid professionals. Why do you feel you need to be paid more?”

*Physician pivoting:* “This issue is ultimately about access to health care. Currently, payments are based on median charges from 1989 and do not cover the cost of providing care. Many clinics are on the verge of closing, and people will not receive the care they need and deserve. Thousands of Minnesotans will be without care if the Legislature doesn’t address its need to adequately fund the cost of providing medical care to these patients.”



# Any good player knows—it's all in the follow-through.

## LESS THAN SUCCESS

So the resulting public health policy was less than your expectations. You did not quite get what you want. The silver lining is that in the public policy process it is never over, so do not quit now. There is a process for moving forward.

- *Campaign Evaluation.* One of the first steps is a comprehensive campaign debrief or evaluation. In this process you and your coalition should stop to evaluate every part of your campaign, identifying strengths and weaknesses.
- *Re-strategize.* The next step after a campaign evaluation is to strategize about how to move forward. Meet with members of your coalition and create a new plan. Look for ways to address campaign weaknesses and intensify strengths.
- *Identifying targets.* Your coalition should identify elected officials and rank them in an attempt to identify strategies to move each elected official upward on the continuum.
- *Polling and New Research.* Your coalition should consider whether to collect new opinion polling data to determine public sentiment with regard to the issue. Additionally, new scientific research could be commissioned (internal source) or gathered and examined (external source) for campaign purposes.
- *Media/Press.* If your coalition suffered a recent major defeat but your group is emboldened, committed now more than ever, it will be important to convey that message to the public. Consider holding a press conference, running an advertisement, or submitting a letter to the editor announcing your coalition's disappointment and intention to continue its efforts. This informs the public and demonstrates to the elected officials that this issue is not going away.
- *Relationship Maintenance.* An effort should be made to maintain relationships with current elected officials and any potential incoming elected officials. Additionally, it is important to keep your coalition's base energized and committed to its objectives.

*Just because  
you lose Round  
One is no  
reason to quit*

## SUCCESS

Congratulations! You have passed a public health policy. Your hard work, determination, passion, and persistence have paid off. You definitely deserve the opportunity to celebrate your victory. Unfortunately, when the party is over the work is not always done.

On successful passage of a particular health policy or an overriding statewide policy, coalitions often declare victory and fall into the trap of backing off and not completing the important work that still remains. Legal challenges, changes in public opinion or sympathy for opposition can lead to reversal of any policy.

Here are some tips for thorough implementation:

- *Maintaining relationships.* You worked hard to build positive relationships with elected officials. Don't let that effort go to waste. Find ways to keep the dialogue open between you and your elected officials, such as attending local town hall meetings, events, and their annual fundraiser or picnic.
- *Positive attention.* Thank your elected official by bestowing positive attention, such as running thank-you advertisements and sending thank-you letters to the editor.
- *Events.* The goal is to inform the wider public about the enactment. This can be done with press conferences, celebrations, and countdowns.
- *Media opportunities.* Actions by a government body often draw media and provide opportunities. Examples of the focus and messaging for these opportunities include positive health impacts (people are healthier), positive economic impacts (the sky didn't fall), and some anti-opposition (dispelling or minimizing the myths).
- *Continuing patient education.* Physicians can make each patient aware of the new public health policy and suggest some tools related to healthier living.
- *Post-passage health research.* This research explores the "before and after" effects of the new public health policy. For example, are the admissions or incidences of myocardial infarctions significantly less after the passage of a new workplace smoking ban?



Minnesota Medical Association

1300 Godward Street NE, Suite 2500 | Minneapolis, MN 55413  
ph 612/378-1875 or 800/342-5662 | fx 612/378-3875  
mma@mnmed.org | www.MMAonline.net

*Physicians working for a Healthy Minnesota*

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