

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR LEGISLATORS

As a clinical nurse specialist, you are well aware that the effectiveness of your work often depends on the quality of your relationships. So it is true with government relations. You must develop relationships with legislators and their staffs long before you turn to them for an understanding of your point of view on an issue. Strong personal relationships are the best means of influencing legislative decision making. Personal visits, letters, phone calls, faxes, and e-mails also are important, especially when they come from constituents who are well-known, highly regarded, and have gone out of their way to be helpful in a variety of ways in the past. Building relationships takes time and careful effort, but it is the most effective way to shape the thinking of those who decide public policy.

How do you go about building such relationships? In much the same way as you cultivate friendships: by being friendly and personally helpful. “Personally helpful” cannot be emphasized enough. Become a useful and trustworthy source of sound information and insight, contributing your personal time to professional and political needs and interests. Your own party affiliation should not restrict you. Every elected officeholder represents an entire state, legislative district, or local government – Republicans, Democrats, and independents alike. You do not have to be a member of the legislator’s political party to work together and even to become friends.

You will need, however, to do some homework about the key issues, economic facts, employment, etc. that are important to the interests and viewpoint you represent. In the same way, familiarize yourself about the legislators with whom you want to build relationships.

Become a fountain of facts. Know the number of NACNS members in the official’s state or district.

Become expert in nursing pipeline and scope of practice issues. Be aware and be prepared with examples relevant to your state or congressional district.

Some relationship building phases in a legislative advocacy program are:

1. Write and/or call legislators on current issues.
2. Make personal visits either in Washington, D.C., your state capitol or in the home district offices on current issues or broad problems.
3. Organize group visits on issues of mutual importance.
4. Invite legislators to tour your institution or department and meet with your administration, faculty, and students for a discussion of problems and issues. Also consider inviting legislators to attend special events where they might get some publicity.
5. Get personally involved politically in legislators’ campaigns and the activities of your political party.

Here are some ways you can work to build relationships at the federal level:

1. Develop resource relationships which officeholders can call upon at will for reliable and authoritative technical/economic information.
2. Leverage legislative influence through effective coalition activities.
3. Where appropriate, provide financial support for legislators’ campaigns through individual contributions.

These steps will progressively build your credibility with the officeholder. Establishing a reputation as an objective data source, for example, builds credibility for subsequent communications expressing opinions on issues. Ongoing political activity establishes you as a friend whose views are likely to receive more weight than someone who writes from time to time.

Using Data

Healthcare information, education, workforce, and economic data are often essential to support your case on key issues. The data can be presented as a sentence or two in a letter to a legislator, as a brief paragraph in position papers, press releases and personal visits, or in a brochure for the public or government audiences.

If technical data are necessary to address specific issues, they must be used with sophistication. Technical experts on the staffs of policymakers may comprehend and delight in complex tables and charts, but the decision makers themselves have very low tolerance for such detail. When using charts to convey information, avoid using technical/health care jargon. If such terms are required, you should explain them so that a non-technical audience can understand.

Here are some handy guidelines for using health-care and economic data:

1. Use exactly the information you need to build credibility and make the case, and then stop. Stretching data to fit the need would strain your credibility.
2. Test your presentation by delivering it to a few friends or colleagues beforehand. If they find it tiresome or confusing, a good chance exists that your target audience would too.
3. Make sure you have your references for your data handy or be prepared to make it available if necessary.

Personal Visits

Personal meetings with legislators and their key staff members are the most effective way to make your case on an issue. Such visits also are a good way to introduce yourself as a constituent. A personal meeting can be difficult to accomplish with a policymaker's busy schedule, but remember that you are offering an important business contact. You can arrange the meeting with the policymaker directly or through staff aides.

The following suggestions will help make the best use of your time and the legislator's:

1. Always make an appointment. Arranging the first meeting may require patience on your part, but be persistent. Later, as you become known as a resource, gaining appointments will be less difficult. This situation will occur especially if you also become known as a campaign contributor, political activist, or health-care/nursing education leader who can muster support on the issues from a variety of groups through your coalition activities.
2. Be prepared to meet with key legislative personnel or committee staff members if the legislator is unavailable at the last moment. Briefing these people before your visit also may be useful so that they can prepare the legislator. Staff aides are often more knowledgeable about details of a specific issue than lawmakers themselves.
3. If several individuals join you in the visit, decide in advance who will be the principal spokesperson. That individual, of course, should encourage others to participate in the discussion to share particular expertise or experiences.
4. If you want to discuss a specific issue, make sure you are thoroughly familiar with all aspects of it before going into the meeting.

5. When talking to legislators, try to be concise, well organized, and mindful of the other person's time. State your view firmly, but be attentive to the policymaker's position also.
6. Open the discussion by reminding the legislator who you are, whom you represent (i.e., yourself, your institution, your NACNS state organization), and why you are there. Know the issue and the bill number. Clearly state your concern about the issue, how it will affect you, your institution, and the community. Avoid harsh accusations. Be polite and respectful. Often, we forget how we sound when we are particularly passionate about an issue.
7. Always be truthful and never mislead. Your personal credibility and that of the NACNS is at stake. If you do not have the answer to a question, do not improvise. Promise to get back to the questioner with the necessary information, and be sure to do so promptly.
8. Come prepared with a brief (one-page) position paper that summarizes your points with facts, and leave it with the legislator or staff aide. If a lengthier document or answers to questions are relevant, send them later with a "thank-you" note.
9. To gain a favorable vote, follow up with letter(s) and calls to your legislators and their key staff advisors at appropriate points as the issue progresses.
10. Maintain the relationship. Get your name on legislative mailing lists. Find occasions to see your legislators again in appropriate circumstances, and write to them on the issues from time-to-time. If you obtain reports or data that will be useful to legislators and their aides and that you can share with them, send those documents with a brief personal cover note. Eventually, you may even find policymakers coming to you for information, help, or your point of view on new issues.

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