PERSONAL ACCOUNTS
MPA Members Share Their Personal Experiences Advocating for Your Profession

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Release Any Fears and Educate Your Elected Officials

One of our roles as pharmacists is to advocate for our profession. I find myself comfortable sharing information about our profession’s unique skills and abilities with physicians, patients and other health care providers; however, I have always been somewhat apprehensive about sharing this information with politicians. This all changed earlier this year when I was asked to meet with U.S. Congressman Fred Upton to discuss current issues facing pharmacists.

In February, pharmacist Sheroyl Kirby and I met with Congressman Upton at his Kalamazoo office with several MPA representatives. Prior to the meeting, MPA helped coordinate topics for each of us to discuss. As a pharmacist, employed at a community-teaching hospital in his district, I was assigned the topic of drug shortages. During our meeting, I provided him with several examples of how drug shortages were adversely affecting patient care at my health-system. The congressman listened attentively, because one of his constituents had recently contacted him to inform him that she was having trouble obtaining methotrexate, which was in short supply, and wanted to know if he could do something to address that particular issue. After the meeting, I wrote Congressman Upton a letter, which emphasized many of my talking points and thanked him for his time.

During the meeting with the congressman, I learned several things. First, you do not get much time to talk. We were granted a 30-minute meeting. You need to choose your talking points carefully. Second, follow-up is just as important as the actual meeting. You want to write a follow-up letter, which reiterates your talking points, and send it via mail and/or fax to the legislator. Do not e-mail the letter to your congressman, as they are not obligated to reply to e-mails. Finally, keep the MPA abreast of your meetings, so they can follow-up too and reinforce points that you have discussed.

As pharmacists, we need our elected officials to have a solid understanding of the role we play in patient care and public health. While MPA does an excellent job lobbying on our behalf, it is up to us to help share our story. From the politician’s perspective, information means a lot more coming from a constituent within their district, compared to a lobbyist. If you have not taken the opportunity to meet with your legislator recently, I encourage you to do so. If you would like to meet with your legislator, but need guidance, contact MPA and they will identify someone to help mentor you through this process.

— Ryan Bickel, Pharm.D., pharmacy manager, Borgess Pipp Hospital
All Politics are Local

Whenever asked why we’re politically active, we can give you two main reasons. The first is because it is a necessity in today’s political world. Secondly, it’s the only way to get your voice heard. All politics are local and by being involved, the position you advocate for is being well-represented.

There are four principles of legislative involvement to keep in mind when you start to become active in grassroots:

1. **Know your legislator**
2. **Visit them in their office**
3. **Attend local events that they attend**
4. **Make sure they know who you are**

When you are with them, always talk to them regarding the issues you promote. Educate them about the things that are important to you and your profession. Donate to their campaign but, more importantly, work on their campaign and help them in their efforts; this will ensure they know you and will be willing to listen to you. Let them know that you are a valuable resource should they have any questions regarding pharmacy issues. Be sure to hand them your business card or provide them with a way to get in touch with you.

We are able to have access to our legislators because of the above work we have done to cultivate a relationship with our Michigan Senator, Bruce Caswell, and our Representative, Nancy Jenkins. Because of our efforts, we can call their offices, present our issues and get a response.

We are also very fortunate to have been able to see the inner-workings of a campaign, having been involved in Harvey Schmidt’s first campaign for state representative from the beginning and seeing all the hard work involved.

We’ve given you a lot of advice, but the most important thing that we hope you’ll take away from this is that all politics are local. Having one-on-one time to meet and talk with people is the best way for legislator’s to find out constituent’s thoughts. As a constituent yourself, you also need to talk to your legislators and educate them on issues that are important to you and your professional practice. Work with them, donate to support their efforts and walk for them to help spread the word about their campaign.

— Mike Sanborn, president, Hudson Pharmacy Inc., and JoAnn Sanborn, manager, supervisor and owner, Hudson Pharmacy Inc.
I began being a political advocate approximately 15 years ago. As my practice expanded and I began to realize the far-reaching influence that pharmacy benefit managers, and both the state and Federal governments, have as paying sources for pharmacy, I began to reach out. My eyes were truly opened when I joined the MPA Third Party Committee.

The first legislative meetings I participated in were with Congressman Dave Camp in the early 90s, and I felt like I was just beating my head against the wall. It wasn’t until about a decade later that I realized what we had spoken about had actually gotten through. But it was Tony Stamas, former Michigan State Senator, who really helped me focus. He explained that the profession of pharmacy appeared to be whining all the time and that every time he met with our lobbyists it seemed like we were asking for something rather than giving and emphasizing the benefits of pharmacy.

After several meetings with Tony in the early 2000s, I began to change strategies and worked hard at presenting facts to our elected officials. I developed a relationship with a new, young legislator named John Moolenaar, who I knew since our children went to school together. John, despite being elected to both the House and Senate, has never changed what-so-ever. He works very hard at everything he does to support his family. John is genuine and seeks to help the constituents in his district. He has been a very good advocate for pharmacy, and has taken the time to really understand the issues at hand. Recently, my wife Amy and I were also involved in the early stages of Gov. Rick Snyder’s campaign. He really does get it, and ever since he entered office, the state has moved forward leaps and bounds.

All pharmacists regardless of their practice area must get involved in politics. With the passing of the Affordable Care Act and the ruling by the Supreme Court, pharmacy is in a very unique and exciting position to help bring cost effective health care to all Americans. The practice of pharmacy, likewise, faces many challenges, and unless we are knocking on the doors of our elected officials telling them about the fantastic, cost-effective care we provide, we will be left out of many important aspects of health care reform.

The time is NOW for all pharmacists (health-system/hospital, community, specialty, consultant/long-term care, mail-order) to work together to make our profession stronger than ever. No whining and no begging. But instead a proactive ‘let me show you what we can do (and have done)’ approach to advocating on behalf of pharmacy.

— Kevin Roeder, B.S., chief executive officer, MiHomeRx
I’ve always been involved in the profession of pharmacy on many levels, including within the state and on a national level. In 2008, I helped organize a fundraiser for former state Rep. Kathy Angerer to provide her with support from pharmacy. The group organizing the event wanted to support people who were going to fight for our profession when the need arises.

A lot of work was done by myself and MPA staff to plan to the event. We mailed invitations and advertised as well as organized catering services for the event. We targeted and tried to attract many people who would support her agenda, including friends of pharmacy and MPA. Essentially, as many people as possible. Much of this was done through word of mouth and inviting individuals that we knew would support her and the profession.

In addition to this, I am involved on many other levels, advocating for the mission of pharmacy in Michigan and across the nation. I have attended many events, including a recent mental health event in Grand Rapids.

Pharmacists need to get involved because most of the time they sit back and just watch things happen, and then when they don’t like what happens, they get upset and call me to ask how this could happen to our profession. My response to them most of the time is “Where were you when myself and others were fighting for our profession?”

Most of the time, pharmacists are very complacent when it comes to fighting for our rights and our profession, so it is of the utmost importance to get involved and fight for patient care and services such as medication therapy management. We are the medication experts and we need to fight. It is very important to share your views and feelings with legislators and let them know how we can enhance patient care, reduce medication costs and improve outcomes.

We all must fight to keep our profession moving forward! Get the most out of your MPA membership, as the Association gives everyone opportunities to get involved. I also encourage you to call your local legislators and volunteer.

— Sahar Swidan, chief executive officer and president, Pharmaceutical Care Solutions, Inc.