

Become an Effective Advocate

by Cynthia A. Smith, MS, CAS, JD

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF PEOPLE WITH AD/HD

takes a commitment of time, basic understanding of the issues and legislative process, and passion. Effective advocates have passion for the issues and passion for helping the people who will be impacted by the change. Although this month's column provides guidance on how to advocate effectively at the national level, its suggestions also apply to the state or local level, including city councils or local school boards.

Patience is of foremost importance, as bringing about change at any level of government can take significant time. Bills not signed into law by the end of a legislative session must be reintroduced, debated, and voted on again in the next session. For example, negotiations to amend the Americans with Disabilities Act began in 2003, after the Supreme Court issued a series of decisions that overrode congressional intent in passing the ADA. The law that eventually passed, the ADAA, went into effect on January 1, 2009—nearly six years later.

A basic understanding of the legislative process and of state and federal jurisdiction is also important, as is a sense of what is possible in a given political climate. The first step in the federal legislative process is for a member of Congress to introduce a bill in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. After a bill is introduced, it is referred to the committee that has jurisdiction over the issue. Legislators at both the federal and state levels of government are assigned to committees for each legislative session. The committee conducts the majority of the work on the bill, which must be voted on and passed out of the committee before it can go to the floor of the House or Senate for a vote. The current members of Congress, their committee assignments, and the jurisdiction of each committee can be found at house.gov (click on *Committees*), and at senate.gov (click on *Committees*). Similar information for state legislators is available on state government websites. More information on

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the legislative process, including pictorial charts on how a bill becomes a law, may be found at thomas.gov or on the House or Senate websites.

Effective advocates understand the importance of developing long-term, respectful, and reciprocal relationships, not only with legislators but also with their staff. Staff members play a critical role in the legislative process, as legislators look to them for information and guidance on a wide range of issues. Treat all staff members in a courteous and professional manner. They are your link to your legislator.

When meeting with legislators, it is important to demonstrate knowledge of the issues within the context of your lived experience. Living with AD/HD and related disorders makes you an expert on the topic, and you should feel confident that sharing your experience is a vital contribution to fostering social change. It is not necessary to know how government budgets are created or how public programs are designed or implemented. Many advocates for people with disabilities began their careers because of personal or family experiences. The ability to offer alternative approaches and creative strategies to solve policy problems can make for the most effective advocacy.

Find out which organizations share your concerns and priorities and which individuals or organizations might oppose them. Whenever possible, work in collaboration with others and have an open dialogue with people on both sides of an issue. The passage in 2008 of the ADAA and the Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act was the result of long negotiations and many compromises among the vested stakeholders. When constructing your message, be clear about what you want your legislators to accomplish, how you think they could accomplish it, and how the proposed change in public policy will impact their constituents.

Finally, it is important to be committed

to social change. Change occurs only when the individual working to create change accepts that it will take time, commitment, and dedication to affect public policy at the local, state, or national level.

CHADD will be joining the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry for its annual Hill Day on May 8, 2009. Consider going with us to Capitol Hill to make your voice heard by your representatives in Congress. Participants will be teamed with individuals and family members from other national organi-

zations and AACAP professional members.

More information on how to be an effective advocate can be found in the *CHADD Advocacy Manual*, available in the public policy section of chadd.org, the CHADD website. Visit CHADD's public policy webpages to learn more about Hill Day or other public policy initiatives. For an example of successful advocacy in action, read the story posted in the public policy section about CHADD Pennsylvania, "Grow Your Grassroots and Better Influence Public Policy." ●