

Federal Advocacy Handbook for the American Mental Health Counselors Association



It is estimated that today one in four Americans exchange some form of communication with his or her federal legislators annually. This translates into about 80 million communications per year emanating from constituents to legislators. Senators from larger states have some extra staff to deal with their higher volume of communications, but overall, there was no growth for several decades in the number of personal office staff and recently there have been significant reductions. Therefore, legislators are inundated with messages as they have never been before. It is up to constituents to learn how to navigate the legislative system, so their advocacy message garners the attention of the right legislators and their staff.

D.C. and Local Office Visits

All members of the U.S. House and Senate have offices on Capitol Hill and one or more local offices in their district or state. The purpose of constituent contact with an office is to reach the appropriate staffer tasked with representing your policy concern to the legislator. DC and local office staff report frequently to their supervisor or legislator on meetings they have with constituents. Legislators particularly tune into the views of constituents who make office visits because by making the extra effort to show up for visits, these constituents have demonstrated they are very attuned to their legislator's actions, and consequently, are very likely voters on Election Day. Additionally, it's the most informed constituents who are more likely to financially support a legislator's political activities. Modern politicians are always in campaign mode, and a legislator is more likely to pay attention to concerns expressed personally.

The best way to communicate with a legislator, short of meeting the legislator's staff in person, is writing a personalized email letter that briefly states your point of view on a particular policy action. All email letters should state your name, address, professional affiliation, and concern. Legislators should respond to your thoughtful letter, if they don't, call the office and remind them that you want to vote for the legislator, but you need to know how he/she is representing your interests. To find each office contact information go to www.senate.gov or www.house.gov and scroll down the menu for your legislators' names. Draft a well-written brief letter in your word processor and then copy and paste this text into the email box furnished on the legislators' page. AMHCA has prepared text on its legislative priorities that will help you construct your email message. A brief well-written letter is more likely to make an impression and get a response. Legislative staffers keep tallies of the number of letters and phone calls they receive on a particular subject to appraise the legislator of constituent sentiment on a particular matter. Do your best to have your views included in that briefing of your legislator.

Communication by Email

Before the advent of email, congressional offices had to process a lot of paper letters. The good news was writing a letter, sealing the envelope, and applying postage took some effort. So long as these steps were required, most constituents' letters were thoughtful and reflected their personal views on a policy matter. With email, congressional offices now receive massive amounts of written communication which too often lack thoughtful, unique appeals. Often one or two organizations can generate hundreds of form messages into just one office.

Communication by Telephone

Phone calls to a legislator's office are typically reserved for controversial votes about to be taken on the floor or in committee. AMHCA may occasionally issue legislative alerts requesting members to call their legislators about a bill awaiting action. Staff typically tallies these phone messages, and these tallies can be influential when a legislator is wavering on a vote.



Understanding a Legislator's Office

Today's House and Senate offices are similar to a small policy firm. Even in a small state a United States Senator has at least 25 staffers in his/her Washington, DC office. In addition, each Senator has several offices across his or her state staffed with more caseworkers, policy advisors, press secretaries, and office managers.

The size of a Senator's staff is adjusted for the population of their state, but House staff sizes are similar, with about six to eight paid staffers in each office plus uncompensated interns and fellows. Today, each House member represents approximately 725,000 people, whether or not he/she has a district in Montana or New York City. Members who chair committees or are in leadership are allocated more staff and they usually are far more senior and knowledgeable than personal office staff.

Personnel Hierarchy

The structure and operation of legislators' personal office in the House and Senate are similar. Each House and Senate office has a front office assistant or in the case of the Senate, several front office assistants. They are tasked to answer the phone and greet guests. These assistants are often new to the legislator and aspire to become more knowledgeable about public policy, potentially landing a better position on the Hill.

Next level up the hierarchy is the legislative correspondent. A legislative correspondent is usually a newer and younger staff member, who has familiarized him or herself with their boss's views on numerous issues. A legislative correspondent will be assigned to respond to constituent emails, letters, or meeting requests having to do with a specific policy area. The legislative correspondent drafts a generic letter detailing the boss's views on a particular policy issue, and then individualizes the response so the constituent feels he/she has been heard by his/her legislator. Often they are asked to meet with constituents visiting from home.

The legislative correspondent interacts daily with the more senior legislative assistants. Most legislative assistants have worked their way up, having previously answered phones and responded to constituent mail. Legislative assistants become the legislators' key staff contact for specific policies and legislation affecting their area. These staffers are tasked with informing the legislator of political and policy considerations as well as the consequences of a particular policy action. In addition to a few years working in the office, legislative assistants are often tasked with covering a Senate or House Committee. They usually have an advanced degree in political science, health policy, or law and a particular policy interest or specialty area.

Above the legislative assistant position are the legislators' legal counsel and legislative director. The legislators' legal counsel is a policy expert who also practices law; he/she has the responsibility of informing the legislator of the legal consequences arising from legislation he/she introduces and/or supports. Many legislators' personal legal counsel has an advanced degree in public policy, health policy, economics, or business in addition to a juris doctorate degree.

The legislative director coordinates all the policy flowing through the legislator's office. He/she manages the legislative correspondents and assistants. Often the legislative director will meet each week with all legislative correspondents and assistants to discuss legislation his/her legislator is considering, co-sponsoring, and opposing. It is often the responsibility of the legislative director in addition to the legislative assistants to brief the legislator on the bills he/she is being asked to consider. Lobbyists from many interest groups contact every office each day and they typically meet with whoever is the most senior person they can reach.



Additionally, each legislator's office usually employs a press assistant or press secretary. Legislators must get the word out about bills and issues they're supporting. Many legislators hire press assistants and press secretaries who solicit spots for them on radio and television shows aired throughout their districts and states. Other legislators, often those with national political ambitions, expect their press assistants and press secretaries to land appearances for them on the heavily watched political talk shows. Print media play a great role in allowing legislators to share their activities with their constituents. It is the job of the press assistant and secretary to scour all of the news sources in search of stories that mention the legislator's name and their constituents' response to their work.

Lastly, at the top is the Chief of Staff. It is his/her job to oversee the office's day to day management as well as meet the legislator's policy goals and ambitions. The Chief of Staff also manages the legislators' office budget allocation. He/she often sets staff salaries and does staff performance reviews. Chiefs of Staff have strong management skills and are frequently long serving and very influential with the Senator or Representative.

Congressional Committees

Committees employ numerous staff members who specialize in the subject area of a particular committee. Most committee staffers have prior experience working for a legislator's personal office. Others may come to staff a congressional committee having previously served as an academician, policy expert or lawyer to a think tank, government agency or advocacy group. The committee staff role is to serve as expert resources to committee members in a particular subject, and they often wield significant influence over the policy decisions of individual members. They are also excellent resources for personal staff, lobbyists and advocates. The chairman of a committee must come from the majority political party in the body in which he/she serves. His counterpart, known as the ranking member, comes from the minority political party. Selection of chairs and ranking members is done by the leaders of Congress and is based largely on seniority and loyalty to Party leaders. The chairman and ranking member employ their personal office staff in addition to committee staff. A chairman and ranking member typically hire their own partisan senior staff who manage the other committee staff.

Lobbyists, also known as government relations staff, consult with congressional committees and their staff. They build relationships with staff serving the committees most relevant to the causes they advance. Lobbyists may meet with committee staffers to suggest changes in legislative language or discuss legislative strategy as a bill advances. Relationships with committee staffers often prove fruitful; they are the key to knowing what transpires behind the scenes. A good relationship with a committee staffer has often made the difference between simply getting a stand-alone bill introduced by a member and getting that stand-alone bill considered for inclusion in a larger bill moving out of committee to the floor for a vote.

Key Committees for AMHCA

Legislative process is always evolving so its norms and rules change. During each two-year Congress, thousands of bills and resolutions are referred to committees. To manage the volume and complexity, Congress divides its work between standing committees, special or select committees, and joint committees. These committees are further divided into subcommittees. Of all the measures sent to committees, only a small percentage is considered. By considering and reporting on a bill, committees help to set the floor agenda.



When a committee or subcommittee decides to consider a measure, it usually takes four actions.

1. The committee requests written comments from relevant executive agencies.
2. Hearings are held to gather additional information and views from non-committee experts.
3. The committee works to perfect the measure by amending a bill or resolution.
4. Once the language is agreed upon, the committee recommends the measure for floor consideration. Often it also provides a report that describes the purpose of the measure.

In the Senate, the Finance Committee has jurisdiction over all Medicare legislation, including our provider status bill. In the House, the Ways and Means Committee and its Health Subcommittee authorize Medicare legislation. Additionally, the Energy and Commerce Committee shares jurisdiction over Medicare outpatient services. Appointment of a legislator to any of these committees is considered a plum committee assignment.

AMHCA also lobbies before committees with oversight responsibility for the Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). For action on problems with the VA, we work with the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. With DoD issues we work with Armed Services. Following are the committees AMHCA follows most closely:

Senate

<http://www.senate.gov/>

Appropriations (funding for HHS/SAMHSA, HRSA, DoD, DVA)

Armed Services (DoD workforce, mental health services for active duty/TRICARE)

Finance (Medicare, Medicaid, ACA)

Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (SAMHSA, ACA)

Veterans' Affairs (DVA)

House

<http://www.house.gov/>

Appropriations (SAMHSA, HRSA, DoD funding)

Armed Services (DoD workforce, mental health services for active duty/TRICARE)

Energy and Commerce (Medicare Part B, Medicaid, SAMHSA, ACA)

Veterans' Affairs (Dept. of Veterans Affairs)

Ways and Means (Medicare All Parts)

Legislative Terminology

Amendment – A proposal to alter the text of a pending bill that strikes some text and inserts different language.

Appropriation – The provision of funds, through an annual appropriations act enabling federal agencies to make payments out of the Treasury for specified purposes. The formal federal spending process consists of two sequential steps: authorization followed by an appropriation.

Authorization – A statutory provision that enables future funding for a program or agency. An authorization



may be effective for one year, a fixed number of years, or an indefinite period. An authorization may be for a definite amount of money or for “such sums as may be necessary.” The formal federal spending process consists of two sequential steps: authorization and then appropriation.

Cloture – The only procedure by which the Senate can vote to place a time limit on consideration of a bill or other matter and thereby overcome a filibuster.

Conferees – Senators and Representatives, usually with senior status, appointed to serve on conference committees. Conferees are usually appointed from the committee or committees that reported the legislation. They are expected to try and uphold the Senate’s or House’s position on measures when they negotiate with conferees from the other body.

Hearing – A meeting of a committee or subcommittee, which is usually open to the public. Their purposes include taking testimony, gathering information on proposed legislation, conducting an investigation, or reviewing the operation or other aspects of a federal agency or program.

Lame Duck Session – When Congress reconvenes following the November general elections to consider various items of business. Some lawmakers who return for this session will not be members of the next Congress. Hence, they are informally called “lame duck” participants in a “lame duck” session.

Omnibus – a single bill rolled into a single vote that packages together several often unrelated measures. Such a bill is typically very large and affects many individuals and interests.

Ranking Minority Member – The highest ranking (and usually longest serving) minority member of a committee or subcommittee.

Recess – A temporary interruption of House or Senate’s business. Legislators take many recesses during the year.

Legislative Meeting Protocol

- Call the Senator or House member’s district office at least a week in advance of when you’d like to meet with the Senator or House member’s staffer.
- When calling to schedule an appointment, ask to speak with the person who handles the particular issue for which you’re making the call.
- Once you get the legislative aide on the phone, ask to have his/her full name and write it down and retain it for the meeting later and a follow-up thank you note.
- Explain to the staffer that you’d like the Senator or Representative’s support for the bill, S. __ or H.R. __. Give brief summary of the issue, and ask if you can have 15 minutes of the aide’s time sometime soon to discuss the bill with him/her in person.
- Thank the staffer for taking your call and scheduling an appointment with you.
- For the office visit, dress in business casual or business attire, carry along a business card which you’ll hand to the Senator or Representative’s staffer and/or secretary. Leave behind a one page briefing sheet on the bill/issue. (This could also be an email or letter you drafted to the office).
- Introduce yourself to the legislative staffer, and briefly describe the mental health counseling profession.



Be sure to mention that mental health counselors are a newer mental health profession and while they are very large in number in the private sector, the federal government (Congress) has been slow to recognize their value and skills.

- Tell him/her why your bill or issue is important to you as a constituent. Explain why the bill should be important to the Member of Congress, and give the staffer your card letting him/her know he/she can contact you if he/she has questions about the bill and groups or persons supporting it.
- Give the staffer a firm handshake and profusely thank him/her for meeting with you.
- Follow up with a thank you email to the staffer after your appointment.
- Go home and share what you learned with your local colleagues. Ask them to email the same staffer to reinforce your comments on the legislation.
- Talk to your state chapter and encourage these members to reinforce your message.

