

Psychologists Get Involved at the National Level: Grassroots Lobbying on Capital Hill

"What difference does my opinion make in Congress, nobody would listen to me anyway! Besides, I wouldn't know what to say." That is what many psychologists feel about approaching their elected officials when presenting their opinion and needs. Truth is, your voice can count. That is what we learned when a group of students and psychologists went to the New York State senators' offices in Washington DC to lobby for initiatives.

The group included six individuals from New York State. Five were from the New York City area, including myself, a graduate student in the MA psychology program at The New School for Social Research. Others were, Judy Kuriansky, PhD, media psychologist and clinical psychology professor at Columbia University Teachers College, John Pachankis, PhD candidate in clinical psychology at State University of New York at Stony Brook, Greta Winograd, PhD, research fellow at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, and Alice Khang, enrolled at the masters program in counseling program at Columbia University Teachers College. In addition, Barbara Fiese, PhD, Director of the Psychology Department of Syracuse University, attended.

We participated in the advocacy workshop entitled "Becoming an Effective Advocate for Psychology," offered by the American Psychological Association (APA) office of Public Policy. The workshop was held in conjunction with the 114th annual convention of the APA in Washington D.C. in August, 2005, and we spent a day before the convention completing the training pro-

gram in public policy advocacy, to learn why advocacy is important, both personally and professionally, and to develop skills necessary to be an effective advocate.

Why did we do this? As for myself, I'm interested in getting the needs of psychologists represented at the federal level. I believe it is important to help get my profession recognized by elected officials and inform the public about what psychologists do and who they are. This dovetails into APA President Ron Levant's campaign of "Making Psychology a Household Word."

The full-day training portion of the program covered the basic legislative process, the organization of the United States Senate and House of Representatives, and grassroots advocacy; guidelines on how to make an organized presentation to a senator or a congress person.

The three issues we addressed included items currently in legislative process on Capitol Hill. These included bills related to (1) directing funding for behavioral science research to the Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research instead of to the director of NIH, (2) advocating for using the term "health service provider" in place of "clinical psychologist," to maintain current funding levels, and to subsume the training of professional psychologists under the Office of Medicine and Dentistry where it would be included with other doctoral level healthcare professions, and (3) the "Healthcare Equality and Accountability Act." The latter bill aims to eliminate health disparities, have mental and behavioral health issues and its providers become integrated into the language throughout the bill, and to reinstate the national plan to eliminate LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) disparities in the bill.

An exceptionally useful part of the preparation in the training was a series of role-playing and practice activities for the visits.

Our group organized talking points on the three issues mentioned above, brainstormed anecdotal and scientific evidence on the subject based on our own work in psychology and on research we have done, and divided up the speaking roles amongst us so that we would know who was addressing what, in an organized fashion.

The presentations gave us a guide on how exactly to make the visit effective. Preparation is *key*! First, know with whom you are meeting in the office, as usually it will be the head of the senator's legislative health care staff, the amount of time you have, and how the senator's efforts relate to your issue. For example, we discussed what we knew about the senator's work in our State and went on the internet to find out what the senators have done and specific quotes related to our issues.

For example, Hillary Clinton is well known for her support of mental health and on her official website she states: "...[I would] do everything I can to increase understanding about mental and behavioral health and improve access to quality care and treatment." This was related to our general intention and was used in our introduction. In addition, Senator Clinton had already co-sponsored the Campus Care and Counseling Act, so it was easy to transition into our pitch about the graduate psychology education issue. Beyond this, we [the authors] had seen her recently in the Gay Pride parade in New York, and decided that mentioning that would be a good introduction to our presentation about GLBT issues.

For Senator Schumer, we ascertained that his interests have centered around unemployment, tax breaks for college students, prescription drug benefits, and the education budget and we applauded him for his efforts. In addition, we mentioned that he participated in the Gay Pride parade in New York City.

Our team conceived of the visit in three phases, which we had been taught in the training as the "Hook, line, and sinker" technique. In the first phase, we stated that we are constituents who represent universities throughout the state: Columbia Mailman School Public Health, Stony Brook clinical psychology department, The New School masters program's specialization in drug and alcohol counseling, and Syracuse's psychology department. In addition, we emphasized that we came from both urban and rural (upstate) areas, and thanked the senator for his/her work in the areas of our interest. The second phase was a presentation of the legislative issues, which consisted of taking turns talking about each point, and giving a personal anecdote about how the issues are relevant to a psychologist. In the third phase, one person summarized the issues. In closing, we asked if there were any further information we could provide and we asked for the Senators support. We were assured in that our legislators supported our initiatives.

The presentations were positively received and we experienced that the health care staff members we met with were highly receptive to our points.

Senator Schumer's staff member, in fact, said that we were "the best group" she had ever met with (in her two years on the job) because we were so well organized, clear about our points, and summarized our issues at the end.

We found it extremely helpful to go in as a team and to share presentation of the points (although single constituents can be effective). Furthermore, presenting both urban and rural issues was crucial, certainly for our colleagues in Midwestern states but also for New York, as well as having a member of the delegation come from upstate New York.

In all, the experience was exhilarating. The team bonded and the

excitement about our success was inspirational for our continued efforts to serve APA and our profession as public advocates.

The training can be recommended and to get more information visit: <http://www.apa.org/ppo/contact.html> or call (202) 336-6062. Also, you can find out about becoming an APA congressional fellow (offering a decent salary of around \$55,000-\$70,000) where you will be assigned to a congressional office for a year, and you can apply your skills to influence public policy in the field of psychology.

As the professional organization liaison for The New School for Social Research (The NSSR) Psychology Society I plan on helping students here at The NSSR to become more involved in the legislative process at both the national and international level. Citizen participation in politics has a long and active tradition here at The New School. Hence, let us work together to keep this tradition alive in the Psychology Department.

If you want more information on our trip to Washington, on public advocacy, or on plans to help get The NSSR students and faculty involved in public advocacy issues related to psychology please feel free to contact Neil Walsh at wakanyc@yahoo.com.

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