Advocacy Toolkit: State Legislator Education and Engagement

Texas Psychological Association (TPA) members are uniquely positioned to educate and advocate for their profession as constituents of their state legislators. By engaging with elected officials, TPA members can help build a broad base of support for Texas psychologists’ public policy agenda at the State Capitol.

This toolkit provides a framework for your state advocacy efforts. TPA staff also serve as a resource to help refine content, provide communications support, and address any questions you have regarding your own outreach.

Preparation

What will your advocacy look like? Is it an in-person or virtual meeting with your local lawmaker?

Take time in advance of your meeting to review talking points and background materials, including:

- **Advocacy Do’s, Don’ts, and Best Practices** – Suggested tips for interacting with elected officials and community leaders are included below.
- **General TPA Talking Points** – Be comfortable and familiar with the basic overview of the work of TPA and your profession.
- **TPA Legislative Priorities** – Familiarize yourself with the issues that matter to your profession and the association.

Leave Behinds

When visiting with public officials, leave them materials that remind them about TPA and your practice, as well the issues discussed in your meeting. Such content should include:

- **About TPA and Your Practice**
  - One-pager, brochure, or other information on TPA (do not forget about our online Distressed Constituents Guide)
  - Information on your practice, including your contact information; and/or
  - Highlights of your work or areas of expertise (offer yourself as a resource on mental health issues and related policy matters)

Making the Most of Your Meeting

How can you capitalize on your visit, meeting, or event with the lawmaker? If it’s a public or community event (e.g. mental health workshop, roundtable, health fair, etc.), consider working with TPA staff and the lawmaker to invite media to the event or look for opportunities to generate coverage after the event via an op-ed, news release, or social media post(s).
During the meeting, is there an opportunity to invite the lawmaker to a speaking engagement or presentation that you are participating in or hosting? Is there a way to educate the lawmaker about the importance of mental health and your work as a psychologist through workshops, roundtables, or other community events?

You can also offer to have TPA share tips or commentary for their constituent e-newsletter or have TPA follow up periodically with timely information related to mental health that they can share with constituents or use to better educate themselves on the issues.

TPA is ready to support your efforts with resources, including:

- *Media advisories and news releases (including distribution to local media)*
- *Talking points on TPA, our legislative agenda, or other topics*
- *Template op-eds, letters to the editor, newsletter articles or other communications content that – or editing of your own content to ensure it is packaged for maximum impact with media and lawmakers*

**Advocacy Do’s, Don’ts, and Best Practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>DO</th>
<th>DON’T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research &amp; Preparation</td>
<td>Do learn as much as you can about the lawmaker, e.g., their committee assignments, professional experience, etc.</td>
<td>Don’t overload a visit with too many issues or too much personal discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone</td>
<td>Do be personable. Do relate to situations and their work in their home district. Speak authentically.</td>
<td>Avoid being argumentative or defensive in your questions or responses or if they raise controversial or contrarian opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>Do provide relevant data and messaging that demonstrates the work of your practice and/or of TPA.</td>
<td>Don’t overstate your case. Public officials are busy and it is easy to lose their attention if you are too wordy or get too far into the weeds of an issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build</td>
<td>Do encourage continued dialogue. Position you, your practice, and TPA as a resource on mental health and related health care public policy issues.</td>
<td>Don’t be afraid to take a stand on an issue and emphasize the consensus and support for investing in and expanding access to mental health care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Do admit to things you don’t know and offer to follow up with the data or answer.</td>
<td>Don’t let discussions veer into other issues that are off topic or not TPA’s focus. Stay focused on key messages you want to deliver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge</td>
<td>Do thank the lawmaker for their time. If you did not exchange business cards when you arrived or if the meeting is virtual, exchange contact info (cell phone, email) before you depart. Ask to take a photo with them, if in-person (to share on social media to thank them for their time). Extend an invitation to meet again when needed.</td>
<td>Don’t shy away from meetings with legislators whose views you may personally oppose. The best way to overcome differences is to get to know the other person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-Up</td>
<td>Do follow up with a thank you note to the public official. Share your photo and thank the official on social media. Update TPA staff on the meeting and any needed follow up by the association or its lobbyist.</td>
<td>Don’t be offended if a public official is unable to meet and sends a staff person instead. Use the opportunity to cultivate a strong relationship with the staff person and offer to meet again soon with the official.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Case Study / Example**

In May, TPA member Bonny Gardner, Ph.D., had a first-of-a-kind experience: participation in a virtual “town hall” discussing the impact of the COVID pandemic on the health of the Austin community.

Dr. Gardner’s state representative, Vikki Goodwin (D-Austin), invited two local M.D.s, a nursing home administrator, and Dr. Gardner to serve on an informal panel to talk with her and her constituents via Zoom. Dr. Gardner’s prepared remarks focused on how COVID seems to impact community mental health, based on input from her psychology colleagues, her patients, a quick review of the World Health Organization (WHO) website, a TV interview with a social and political commentator, and data supplied by the local mental health authority.

In the short time allotted, and given the conversational style of the town hall, Dr. Gardner could only highlight a few key points, but it was an excellent opportunity to deepen a relationship with
an important member of the Texas Legislature and educate a broader audience about the work of psychologists.

Following the town hall, Dr. Gardner worked with TPA to develop an op-ed and e-newsletter content to share with Rep. Goodwin and her constituents. Such follow up allows TPA to deepen relationships with lawmakers and serve as a professional expert resource on a key public health concern – mental health care.

Need guidance on connecting with your local elected officials? Want to report a meeting with your state representative? Contact Jessica Magee, Texas Psychological Association, jessica@texaspsyc.org.

# # #