

## How to Be an Active and Effective Constituent

March is here, and November, the month of elections, is in the distant future. Even though November is a full eight months away, we are seeing the candidates for both parties begin to establish themselves, and the campaign process is almost in full force. Now is the time to begin thinking about the candidates who are going to run for office in both your local and state races.

The California State Oriental Medical Association held its first "Legislative and Oriental Medicine Advocacy Day" in Sacramento in January. It turned out to be a very informative day, and an excellent time to build relationships. You, as a citizen and registered voter, are considered a constituent to the candidates running for office in your geographic area. I am taking this opportunity to share the following ideas with each of you, because as a profession we are becoming more involved in the political process, both on the state and federal levels.

The first word of advice when beginning to become a constituent is, "Don't be intimidated." A registered voter is the boss in a democracy. It's your job to keep your legislators abreast of your views, provide positive guidance, let them know that you care and are informed on the issues, and that you will be monitoring their votes and actions. Term limits have been enacted in many states. This means that a legislator can only serve a specific numbers of terms in a certain office. Term limits have led to less specialization of legislators in certain areas of interest, less ownership of policy areas, and less attention to the long-term impact of policy changes. Before term limits, some legislators served as a chair of the same House or Senate committee for many years. Now those chairmanships change on a regular basis. Sometimes in government there is a tendency to go for the quick fix, rather than the long-term solution, so your professional input is desperately needed.

Second, you must be prepared. Get to know your legislators. Read their biographies (you can find these online on your state's Web site) and become well-versed in the areas of information and potential legislation that you want to share with the legislator. Be specific to the issues that are of interest to our profession. You must discuss your issues in a way that appeals to a particular policymaker. Always remember to offer to be an ongoing resource to your elected representatives.

### What to Do When You Visit a Legislator Personally

The most important thing is to be on time. Legislators have very busy schedules, and every minute you aren't there means time you will lose with the legislator and his or her staff. It is important to know your issue: Be concise, accurate, honest and earnest. Re-establish old connections and thank the legislators for their support in the past and on other issues. If possible, meet with other acupuncturists and create a list of anticipated questions, then prepare the answers. If a question is asked and you don't know the answer, don't fake it. Complement the legislator on a great question, and state that you will find the answer and get back to them as quickly as possible. Never tell a lie or half-truth to a legislator or staffer. If you do, expect to lose that relationship forever. Be informed about opposing arguments to your position, be aware of alternative plans, and be prepared to counter them. Always be

professional. If you find out that voting for your position on a particular measure is going to be a tough vote for a legislator to justify in his or her district, make sure to tell the legislator that you are aware that this is a tough issue. If you find that your bill has enough votes to pass without the legislator's vote, tell the legislator that you are letting them off the hook and that he or she can abstain from voting. The legislator will appreciate this.

Be sure that you know the staff and appropriate staffers who advise the legislator. The staff is good (and sometimes better) to be in contact with, because it is difficult for a legislator to be knowledgeable on every issue in a legislative session. Get to know the staffers in both the legislator's district office and at the state capitol. It is a good idea to leave written materials with the staffer. This material refers to the matter that you spoke about to the legislator or staffer. Be sure to include your name, address and telephone number.

After every meeting or conversation, send a thank-you note. If you met with the staff, write a note to the legislator to let him or her know that you were there and appreciated the staff's attention. When you praise the staff and the help they gave you, you have endeared yourself to the staff. In return, the staff is more likely to help you later.

#### What to Do When Sending a Letter or E-Mail to a Legislator

##### 1. When writing a letter:

Begin the letter with the inside address. The "Re:" line in the letter is very important. Showing the subject of the letter in one sentence helps the staffer to sort through piles of information. The amount of mail a legislator receives can be as high as 12 inches every day.

##### 2. When sending an e-mail:

Whenever you write a letter or an e-mail, be sure to reference the bill number or budget line item number, and know the budget subcommittee that will be discussing the item, not merely "the issue." Be sure to include your name, address and phone number, and make the body of the letter short and concise.

#### Working With the Media and the Press

You must know the reporters in your area. You should know the reporter who monitors your legislator in the capitol press corps for your local paper. You must re-establish contacts regularly. There are regular "swaps" among reporters regarding all the issues, and there is a high staff turnover rate, especially with the smaller papers.

You must stop by the paper to meet the reporters. The middle of morning is best: This is the time when they are not on deadline. Take your presentation folder, including your business card and information about acupuncture, your clinic and the field of Oriental medicine. Let the newspaper reporter know

that you are available anytime for background information, or quotes on your issues and area of expertise. You must never underestimate the power of the press. Elected officials depend on the media for name recognition and voter approval - and elected officials like to see their name and picture in the paper.

When you have the time and resources, it is important to send out press releases complimenting the legislative actions of your elected representatives on important votes. Be sure to send/fax a copy of your release to your legislator. Even if this information doesn't get picked up in the paper, your elected representatives will be thankful, and they will remember your effort.

Be timely. This means that you must be ready to talk about your local area and issues, and have an angle ready for reporters. If the issue is really important, don't be afraid to play hardball. This might mean getting patients involved, taking out advertisements, performing editorial board rounds as a coalition, conducting press conferences, etc. Let legislators know you are watching, and that the issue is really important, but do not overemphasize the importance of it.

Make sure to know what to say, when to say it and who to say it to. Know what "off the record" and "for background only" mean, and when to use those terms. And capitalize on the eagerness of reporters in their effort to be the first with an important news item.

The elections are coming. Get into the game, have fun, and become an active constituent this year.

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