

SECTION I

What is Advocacy?

ad·vo·ca·cy | noun

the act of speaking on the behalf of or in support of another person, place, or thing¹

In the health care field, patients, parents, caregivers, and providers are natural advocates—they engage in **advocacy** every day on behalf of themselves, their loved ones, and their patients.

Advocacy is more than traveling to Washington, DC to meet with lawmakers; it can take a variety of forms through multiple avenues—writing an email, calling your elected official’s office, attending a town hall meeting, interacting with policymakers through Facebook or Twitter, or meeting with your Members of Congress or their staff in Washington, DC or in the district. Please note the terms elected officials, policymakers and Members of Congress are used interchangeably.

Why Does Advocacy Matter?

If you do not speak up, you cannot guarantee that your views are being heard. If nothing is getting done on your concerns, it may be because Members of Congress and their staff are not aware of the situation or have not heard from someone at home. With a brief phone call or email you can educate Congress about the concerns you have or problems you want addressed. Without hearing directly from those affected by a certain issue about priority problems and recommended solutions, policymakers either will fail to address such concerns or use information and expertise provided to them by others. Some of their sources may not share your views. Policymakers must have your input so they are aware of the needs in their communities and understand fully the ramifications of changes in policy. A well-informed, articulate, passionate citizen can be a valued resource to elected officials and their staff, can raise issues of importance, and can help craft and implement necessary solutions.

Congress Wants to Hear from You

The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to helping Congress meet the evolving needs and expectations of our nation’s citizens. CMF’s 2020 report, *The Future of Citizen Engagement: Coronavirus, Congress, and Constituent Communications*, states that “members of Congress consider staying in touch with constituents as being the job aspect most critical to their effectiveness.”

The most effective forms of advocacy all depend on constituents like you taking action; without constituents personalizing the issue and weighing in, Congressional offices are more likely to lose interest in lobbyists’ messages.

You Already Have the Skills Needed

Advocacy does not require new skills; it just involves applying existing ones in a new context. If you can send an email or leave a brief phone message, you can be an advocate. It’s that easy.

Technology has made voicing your opinion to Members of Congress easier than ever. It only takes a few minutes to send a short email telling your story and outlining what you think needs to be done, and it takes even less time to draft a 280-character comment on Twitter or a short Facebook comment. Members of Congress are becoming more plugged in to social media, making them more accessible to constituents through various formats.

¹ <http://www.yourdictionary.com/advocacy>

² The full report is available at: https://www.congressfoundation.org/storage/documents/CMF_Pubs/cmf_citizenengagement_covid-19.pdf

If you are ready to get more involved—or once you become more comfortable—you can continue to build relationships with the health staff in your Members' Congressional offices. Consider visiting the district

or state offices of your Members at home to build relationships at the local level. Offer yourself as a resource to the offices on health care issues.

No more excuses!

We recognize that people today are extremely busy juggling multiple priorities and do not have time to add on another activity or responsibility. You probably do not remember every detail about the legislative process that you learned in high school civics. You may not follow what is happening in Washington too closely. That's fine! You can still get involved in advocacy. Below are common misconceptions or excuses about advocacy and our response as to why you can still get involved in advocacy.

I'm not an expert in these issues.

The First Amendment gives you the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

You are an expert in the health care challenges you face everyday.

Just be honest about your experiences. Personalize your message.

I'm too busy.

Sending an email takes less than five minutes and does have an impact.

To easily find your Members' websites, visit www.house.gov and www.senate.gov—all you need to do is enter your zip code. Members' websites will have an email webform you can use to send a message.

My Member doesn't care about these issues.

You never know when an issue or story will resonate with a Member or staffer.

Most Members of Congress go into public office and public service with the intention of helping society and their constituents.

I'm not a lobbyist.

Members of Congress are more likely to listen to you—Members and staff consistently rate visits from constituents higher than visits from lobbyists in impact on their decision making.

You are the expert and can provide unique insight into what occurs first-hand in today's health care system and what is needed to improve it.

My concerns are not currently being addressed by Congress.

Maybe this is because they are not aware of the issue. You can help elevate an issue to the national agenda by communicating about it with your policymakers.

If you do not address your issues of concern with your Representative and Senators, you cannot expect them to be aware of the topic and you should not rely on other people to express your same views to them.

It doesn't seem to make a difference.

It does make a difference—it doesn't matter what form you use; each office logs incoming calls, faxes, letters, and emails. Congressional offices value constituent communication and have entire processes in place for handling calls and mail.

The CMF report cited earlier found that 90% of staff surveyed said that responding to constituents is a high priority.

If you have written or called in the past, politely follow up with the office. Usually if you bring it to their attention, you can get a prompt response.

The process is intimidating.

You do not need to know all the nuances of the legislative process—you just have to know who represents you and how to contact them.

The Member of Congress or staffer will not grill you on how you think your goal should be accomplished legislatively—they just want to hear your story and what issues are important to you. It is perfectly acceptable to say you do not have the answer immediately and then follow up later.

I've already done my part—I do not need to keep contacting them.

Matters in Congress are always rapidly changing and therefore it is important that you voice your opinion whenever there is legislation or action that could impact your concerns.

Policymakers often claim the reason for their inaction on matters is that they aren't "hearing (enough) from home" on the issue. Don't give them an excuse!

My Member belongs to a different political party than I do.

Everyone consumes health care. Both parties can generally find agreement on the problems—just how to get there can be a source of contention.

Members will (usually) not ask your party affiliation or who you voted for in the last election. As a constituent and parent, patient, survivor, or provider, you are a valued voice and have every right to (politely) express your views of your political leanings.

I cannot make it to Washington to meet with my Members of Congress.

You do not need to travel to Washington—you can make an impact from your computer or phone by writing, calling, or tweeting.

Each Member of Congress also has state/district offices—meeting with the district staff at home is a great way to build relationships back in your own community.

Attend a town hall meeting or other event when the Member is back in the state/district. Seeing them at home when their schedules are less hectic is a great way to make a connection as a community member.