

Ensuring That Retinal Physicians' Voices are Heard in Government: Advocating for the American Academy of Ophthalmology

The director of congressional affairs at the American Academy of Ophthalmology explains how the organization engages the political sphere.

BY REBECCA HYDER, MA

Since 1977, the Governmental Affairs division of the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) has provided ophthalmologists and their patients a voice with which to communicate concerns to state and federal legislators. Amplifying this voice has become increasingly important as ophthalmologists—and retinal physicians in particular—face numerous policy challenges that have a high potential to complicate practice management and endanger patients' access to care.

Through this voice, the AAO has achieved a number of accomplishments. The AAO has helped prevent Medicare payment cuts, increase funding for basic eye research, and expand vision care services for uninsured children. In recent years, the AAO and its membership have been directly engaged with policymakers on issues important to ophthalmology, including the repeal of the sustainable growth rate formula and reform of Medicare physician pay, the continued availability of compounded pharmaceuticals for the treatment of eye disease, and improving the process for releasing Medicare physician payment data to the public. Through its work with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the AAO continues to defend the value of ophthalmology codes that are being targeted for review, and to ensure that a clear path exists for ophthalmologists to successfully meet quality reporting requirements and avoid related penalties.

This article explains how the AAO creates, amplifies, and effectively uses its advocacy voice.

OPENING DOORS

Based on the experiences of ophthalmology leaders lobbying at the state level, the AAO realized it was crucial that ophthalmology have a federal legislative voice to protect ophthalmic practices and patients and to expand resources. OPHTHPAC, the AAO's political action committee, was born out of these objectives and is the AAO's central point for federal advocacy. Through OPHTHPAC, AAO members and advocates have become a leading voice in Washington representing the profession and the eye care needs of the public.

OPHTHPAC works to support the election of congressional candidates who demonstrate support for the profession and its patients. It is a nonpartisan political action committee that contributes to candidates running for federal office. Because legislation cannot pass without support from both sides of the aisle, OPHTHPAC donates to ophthalmology-friendly candidates regardless of party affiliation. Building strong relationships provides the AAO's staff in Washington and congressional advocates back home with increased access to members of Congress and their staffs. With this access, OPHTHPAC works to ensure that congressional leadership has the information it needs to validate ophthalmology's positions.

OPHTHPAC is run by AAO members who sit on its board and are assisted by AAO staff from the Governmental Affairs division. When considering support of a candidate, the OPHTHPAC committee requests information on the

candidate from AAO members living in the district or state in question, state ophthalmology leaders, and the AAO staff who have likely interacted with the candidate.

In the 2012 election cycle, OPHTHPAC received contributions from approximately 20% of AAO members. As a result, OPHTHPAC was able to disburse nearly \$1.35 million to help many congressional candidates who support ophthalmology's goals. Member participation allowed OPHTHPAC to invest in 178 races across the country in which ophthalmology-friendly candidates ran for election. More than 87% of OPHTHPAC's contributions supported winning candidates. OPHTHPAC member support and leadership played an instrumental role in the AAO's ability to help place 20 physicians in the 113th Congress.

See *Meet the AAO Government Advocacy Team* for a detailed look at the people who coordinate interaction between the AAO and government.

PHYSICIAN ADVOCATES

The success of the AAO's advocacy efforts depends on member participation. AAO members can support OPHTHPAC through financial contributions or by becoming congressional advocates and developing a relationship with members of Congress. The AAO also offers its members a variety of ways to ensure that their voices are heard, from an online advocacy tool to participation in an annual lobbying day in Washington.

A study by the nonpartisan, nonprofit Congressional Management Foundation found that constituent visits are among of the most influential ways to interact with members of Congress.¹ The AAO's Congressional Advocacy Program is a political grassroots network operating at the federal level. Its goal is to match every federal lawmaker with a congressional advocate: an ophthalmologist who volunteers to build a relationship with a lawmaker through constituent visits, phone calls, and letters. The AAO provides a framework to assist advocates in developing these relationships by offering training, 1-on-1 support, and information on current legislation affecting ophthalmology. As a result, when important issues affecting ophthalmology arise in the US Congress, the AAO can rely on these advocates to quickly get its message to members of Congress via direct personal communication.

The AAO also hosts an annual Congressional Advocacy Day in Washington, which is a unique opportunity for interested members of the AAO to directly engage members of Congress on issues facing ophthalmology. Earlier this year, more than 350 ophthalmologists attended the AAO's Congressional Advocacy Day. They were briefed on the issues that would be discussed in the meetings and were provided talking points. Participants also heard from members of Congress about the importance of

MEET THE AAO GOVERNMENT ADVOCACY TEAM

Physician Government Advocates Lead the Way

The OPHTHPAC committee is composed of doctors who represent a range of subspecialties, geographic areas, and modes of practice. OPHTHPAC chairman Donald J. Cinotti, MD, joins 14 committee members who are responsible for overseeing OPHTHPAC and grassroots efforts on behalf of ophthalmology in Washington. Together, they are responsible for educating ophthalmologists and encouraging them to become politically engaged.

Chaired by Trexler Topping, MD, the Health Policy committee is composed of ophthalmologists who oversee the AAO's advocacy efforts that deal with federal government vis-à-vis private payers in coverage, reimbursement, and other payment policies. The 7 committee members also present to AMA panels new ophthalmology codes and new payment values and supervise the appropriateness of current payments. In order to be on the committee, members must have a basic knowledge of Medicare payment and coverage policies related to ophthalmology as well as overall knowledge of coding.

Cynthia Bradford, MD, senior secretary for Advocacy, and George Williams, MD, secretary for Federal Affairs, work closely with the AAO's Governmental Affairs division on a wide array of advocacy efforts. Michael X. Repka, MD, serves as the AAO's medical director for Governmental Affairs, and William L. Rich III, MD, serves as the AAO's medical director for Health Policy.

Staff Members Work to Provide Support

Cathy G. Cohen, AAO vice president of governmental affairs, heads the AAO's Washington office. She is ophthalmology's leading voice on Capitol Hill and supports the day-to-day work of the OPHTHPAC and grassroots program, the health policy work, and state government affairs.

physician advocacy in the development of health care policy. Representatives Phil Roe, MD (R-TN), and Ami Bera, MD (D-CA), both recorded welcome videos for the advocates' dinner briefing. Representative Raul Ruiz, MD (D-CA), attended the event in person and spoke about his path from being an emergency room physician to becoming a member of Congress during a breakfast question-and-answer session.

Members of the AAO who want to participate in advocacy but are unable to commit to the Congressional Advocacy Program may use an online tool provided on the AAO's website to write their members of Congress. In 2013, AAO members used this tool to send nearly 12 000 letters to Congress on several important issues, including the need to protect patients' access to compounded drugs, Medicare

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physician payment reform, improvements to a Medicare program designed to encourage electronic health records adoption, and the importance of vision research funding.

HEALTH POLICY EXPERTS

Much of the AAO's impact comes from its detail-oriented approach to the federal government. The health policy advocacy efforts of the AAO often work in partnership with those of other medical associations on behalf of ophthalmologists and their practices to improve the policies of the Department of Health and Human Services, with a primary focus on policy at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Earlier in 2014, the AAO successfully worked to block a problematic proposal to make downward adjustments to practice-expense values and to suspend a cataract measure that was included in a quality-reporting program for ambulatory surgery centers. It also worked to ease the timeline for adoption of electronic health records.

The AAO ensures fair reimbursement rates through its work at the American Medical Association (AMA) Specialty Society Resource-based Update Committee as well as obtaining new codes through the AMA Current Procedural Terminology Editorial Panel. The Government Affairs Division advocates for appropriate policies on quality measurement and related federal programs as well as Health Information Technology policy. Additionally, the AAO works with private health plans to ensure appropriate coverage for ophthalmology services, fair treatment of providers, and access to quality eye care for the public.

STRONG ADVOCACY MEANS STRONG INFLUENCE

The AAO is only 1 of the many groups on Capitol Hill attempting to work with Congress. In such an environment, it would be easy for the voice of ophthalmology to get drowned out. However, the AAO's network of personal and professional relationships with members of congress and the experience of its leadership in crafting compelling arguments in favor of particular legislative changes allow it to continue to have an effective role in advocating for the needs of eye care practitioners and patients. ■

For more information on OPHTHPAC, visit www.aao.org/advocacy.

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1. Congressional Management Foundation. Perceptions of citizen advocacy on Capitol Hill. <http://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/communicating-with-congress/perceptions-of-citizen-advocacy-on-capitol-hill>. Published 2011. Accessed September 22, 2014.