

# OBSERVATIONS, TIPS & STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH STATE LEGISLATORS & YOUR CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATIONS

## STAFFERS:

- Remember that staffers have the ear of their elected official. They will always be younger than you. Don't be fooled by their age. They are all sharp.
- Work to make sure you get a staffer assigned to VR.
- Strive to convert the staffer to be your advocate in their office.
- Try to cultivate a relationship with key staffers because they will help you get your message through and provide you information and opportunities.
- Take time to educate staffers about the program.
- Make sure they know you are there as a resource for them and to assist them with their constituent issues.
- When dealing with members of Congress, do not forget the staff in their district offices back home.
- Want staffers to see you as the go-to person on VR issues and employment of persons with disabilities.
- Staffers are often overworked and underpaid, so listen as to how you might be able to help them.
- Educate as to confidentiality and figure out ways to help staffers address this with constituents if there is a need for information about their VR case so matters can be addressed very timely.

## COMMITTEE HEARINGS, ESPECIALLY BUDGET:

- Be prepared.
- Have a strategy that is respectful and sets your presentation out from the rest.
- Know what the hot issues are, such as state cars, numbers of minority employees, state contracts, etc., by having someone attend other agency hearings.
- Try to meet with all the members and/or their staff individually prior to the hearing to see if they have any issues which can be resolved before the hearing.
- Listen carefully to their questions and answer as succinctly as possible.
- Do not try to bluff your way through an answer. If you do not know, either have staff with you who can answer or offer to follow up after the hearing with the information.
- Work with your stakeholders to solicit their supportive testimony.
- Most people do not go to their Statehouse, so be prepared to usher them to the hearing room and assist them in getting registered to testify.
- Offer to assist the committee chair and their staff with any accommodation needs, such as recruiting interpreters.
- Prepare and rehearse your testimony in advance. Have some of your key staff play the role of legislators and ask you potential questions so you can fine tune your answers.
- Use your testimony time to concentrate on the key issues you wish to have addressed.

## MATERIALS:

- Always have a leave-behind, which should be no longer than one page and can be front and back.
- Always have your business cards to leave behind. Staple your business card to your leave-behind.
- Especially when there are economic challenges, make sure your materials are well written and of good business quality and not too glossy.
- If you are going to picture consumers in your marketing material, make sure that they are real consumers and not actors and that you have their written permission.
- When meeting with a legislator, state or federal, focus the materials on services and outcomes that have been provided to constituents in their district. Tailor the materials and message to them.

## LEGISLATOR OUTREACH:

- Be proactive and find champions for your cause and develop a relationship with them BEFORE you need one.
- When asked for information, provide it to them ASAP.
- Legislators send out newsletters to their constituents and are always looking for articles for them so share potential news such as outcomes achieved in their district and services available with them all year long.
- If you are going to ask a legislator or staffer for help, be prepared to help them, for example, by giving them draft legislative language if seeking legislation.
- Try to catch members of Congress when back home on recess.
- Legislators like to be recognized and have their pictures in the news so invite them to public events with media present like a celebration built around the anniversary of ADA or NDEAM events. Educate them about your program, services, and outcomes, especially as to their district, to show what you are doing with the resources they have provided.

## STAKEHOLDERS:

- Identify key stakeholders such as SRC members, disability advocates, disability organizations, NRA state chapter, and vendor organizations that can help you get your message out to legislators.
- May be a way to backdoor building relationship if you are constrained from direct contact.

## FINAL WORDS:

- When dealing with legislators, it is sometimes about politics, not necessarily the law or the greater good, so it is not always going to make sense.
- Choose any battles carefully.
- Figure out ways to say yes and if you cannot, offer alternatives that get the legislator where they want to be.