



Legislative Relationship Building

It is more important now than ever for OPRA members to develop new and renew old relationships with state legislators who will help set the path for Ohio's DD system. Use these tips and talking points as a tool in your local advocacy efforts.

Basic Facts

- The state legislature will convene in January as the 129th General Assembly.
- The upper chamber is the Ohio Senate, which is comprised of 33 seats. Senators serve 4-year terms. The make-up of the Senate for 2011-12 will be 23 Republicans and 10 Democrats.
<http://www.ohiosenate.gov/>
- The lower chamber is the Ohio House of Representatives, which is comprised of 99 seats. Representatives serve 2-year terms. The make-up of the House for 2011-12 will be 59 Republicans and 40 Democrats. At least 26 will be brand-new to the state legislature.
<http://www.house.state.oh.us/>
- These state legislators are subject to term limits which prohibit Ohio Senate members from seeking more than two consecutive four-year terms and Ohio House members from more than four consecutive two-year terms.
- Ohio's Congressional delegation for 2011-12 consists of two U.S. Senate members – Sherrod Brown (D) and Rob Portman – and 18 U.S. House members – 13 Republicans and five Democrats.

Tips for Building Relationships

1. Add local legislators to your mail and email lists. Be sure they receive your agency newsletters, communications, and event invitations.
2. Send positive press coverage of your agency to legislators as an FYI. Take time to personalize your communications. Invite them to call you for more information.
3. Invite legislators to any special events/annual meetings/fundraisers held by your organization, especially if it is an opportunity for them to present an award or meet a group of constituents. If you know they are coming ahead of time, be sure to recognize them as honored guests.
4. Host legislators for a tour of your agency and the services you provide. This is the best opportunity to connect with your legislators and for them to get a real understanding of the important work you do. Try to involve an individual served by the agency or family member who benefits from services. Always send a note a thanks for their time and any follow-up info.
5. Remember that legislators are busy trying to become knowledgeable about a myriad of issues. Their knowledge of the system serving individuals with developmental disabilities is likely to be at a beginner's level. The goal is for them to consider you their "local expert" so they call and ask you your opinion when they are presented with a DD issue. Be a good information resource.
6. The schedule for legislators is quite hectic, so scheduling time with them may be difficult at times. Be patient, but persistent, and remember that you have something they are always going to want – YOUR VOTE. Meeting with you is part of their job.

Do's and Don'ts

- ✓ Do introduce yourself and take the opportunity to meet your elected officials if you see them out in the community. State legislators, in particular, are people who often-times hold an additional full-time job and are active members of the community. Be especially on the lookout for local town hall meetings when a legislator has set aside time to meet constituents.
- ✓ Do try various methods in contacting your legislators. Don't assume that a legislator reads every email they receive. Handwritten notes and personal visits/calls are the best mode of contact.
- ✓ Do get to know their staff if you have the opportunity. This greatly increases the chance of your messages getting through during critical times.
- ✓ Do leverage your Board of Directors or consumers and their families if they can help you make a connection to new legislators.
- ✓ Do be brief and conscious of a legislator's time.
- ✓ Don't assume legislators are experts in the field of developmental disabilities. Provide them with the basics before diving into the details. Provide background in written form as a resource.
- ✓ Don't be rude or overly critical. There are ways to disagree with decisions happening at the state level without offending the individuals making those decisions.
- ✓ Don't give inaccurate information. If you are unsure of the answer to a question from a legislator, offer to get back to them.

Talking Points – for use in conversations with legislators

- OPRA members provide a vast array of services: residential, supported living in the community, transportation, and day habilitation – to name just a few. Be certain to describe what you do.
- Providers are employers. This workforce consists of constituents and voters. Provide information relative to your agency regarding the number of people employed and the number of individuals/families you serve.
- These jobs are a direct result of Medicaid funding. Providers of DD services are largely dependent on Medicaid funding and fully dependent on public funding. External funding sources are limited and during tough economic times, donors are harder to come by.
- Cuts in public funding mean cuts must be made in staffing. There are only so many ways to be creative with efficiencies. Eventually cuts translate into fewer services, lost jobs – or both.
- Costs have increased (workers comp, health insurance, provider certification fees, cost of doing business) while rates have remained:
 - Frozen on the waiver side since 2005 (based on 2003 costs)
 - Stagnant for ICFs, which have been dealing with a roll-back since 2003. It's difficult to manage the roll-back when reimbursement is cost-based – meaning you have spend money to receive money. Efficiencies can negatively affect the overall ICF rate in the long run.
- Providers are subject to a great deal of regulation. OPRA members are subject to at least 38 different types of reviews, many of which are duplicative. Responding to audits and reviews is a costly effort that takes the focus away from the individual being served. It is imperative that health and safety be assured, but excessive reviews sometimes get in the way of quality.
- Duplication in the DD system must be eliminated so that the individuals with DD are the focus. Time-consuming paperwork should be reduced. Required training hours should focus on the needs of the individuals being served.