

Advocating for Change

Meet with Your Legislators

Meeting with your legislator is the most effective way to explain the importance of your legislative efforts. These visits allow you to personally "read" your representative's reaction to your request for action.

Before the Meeting

Identify your legislators. You can do this by going to the General Assembly link on the TAADAS site and follow the prompts. If you do not have Internet access, call your library to get the name of your legislator.

Learn about your legislator. This important step can help refine your message. What issues does he or she feel strongest about? To what party does he or she belong? What organizations is he or she a member? You can find out about your representative at Project Vote Smart (www.votesmart.org or **1-888-VOTE-SMART**).

Gather materials and a plan. Pull together a packet of materials to leave behind. You might want to include opinion pieces, news articles, fact sheets, or personal stories. You can print some appropriate pieces from the TAADAS site. If you have a personal story to share, consider bringing photographs of those affected by not receiving timely treatment.

Plan your presentation. If you plan to visit in a team with another person(s), decide who will say what before meeting with your representative so you are not repetitive or speaking over one another. For example, one person can present the objective for reform while the second offers his or her personal story. A very effective team effort is when a family member, consumer, and provider visit together.

Know the facts. Make sure you know the key facts of the proposed legislation and why you want your legislator to support it.

Schedule an appointment. Call Kathleen Kennedy at TAADAS during TAADAS' Day on the Hill or your legislator's office directly (if outside TAADAS' Day on the Hill) to schedule an appointment. Give your name and reason for your visit. If the staff asks how much time you need, request 30 minutes. Remember: you are competing for each legislator's time, so being considerate is key. In some cases, a member of your representative's staff might simply tell you how much time you have to meet. Either way, take the time you are given and be respectful of it.

During the Meeting

One thing to note as you walk into your legislator meeting: Do not be insulted if you end up talking with a staff member. The staff member will make sure your concerns are conveyed to the legislator. In many cases the staff member assigned to a particular bill will be the person determining his or her boss' policy.

Introduce yourself. Give your name, address and the organization you represent or with which you are affiliated. Do not enhance your comments about TAADAS. This is not why you are there. Even if you think it

obvious, make sure to mention that he or she is your representative.

Remain focused. Although you probably gave your reason for visiting when scheduling the appointment, make sure it is clear that you are specifically interested in treatment law reform. Discuss only that issue (unless the legislator asks you about something else).

Explain why you support the issues. Use either objective information or personal anecdotes or both, if possible. Make sure to use fact sheets and materials about the need for rational treatment laws or share a personal story as to how the current law prevented you or someone you know from receiving timely treatment. If you are visiting with a second or third person to speak to the legislator on the issue, remember not to repeat each other. It is particularly helpful if you can relate how the proposed reforms would have prevented the problems you and those close to you have faced.

Allow time for questions and be prepared to respond. Never bluff. If you do not know the answer, it is fine to say so. You can then follow-up with the answer in a letter or phone call to the staff person the next day.

Ask the legislator for his or her position on reform. Although you may be hesitant to do this, it is essential to determine your representative's position.

- Tell those in favor of reform how much you appreciate their stand.
- Opponents need to know that, although you disagree with them, you welcome their open-mindedness. Perhaps later you, or others, will be able to provide additional information which will help change the legislator's mind.
- For those who will not give their position, ask whether you can provide additional material to help them make a decision.
- Whatever their answer, do not burn bridges. Today's supporter may be next week's opponent and vice versa.

Say thank you for the opportunity to visit. No matter what the outcome, leave on friendly terms. Leave behind your packet of materials and a phone number in case they have any follow-up questions.

After the Meeting

Write a follow-up thank you letter. Be sure to follow your visit with a thank you letter and, perhaps, additional materials on the need to provide care for those suffering from substance use disorder and/or mental illness. In the letter, reiterate your hope that your legislator will support this vital, life-saving legislation. Include responses to questions asked during the visit for which you did not have an answer. If you met with a staff member, send a thank you note to the legislator and send a copy to the staffer.

Remember, you can become your representative's informal advisor on treatment law reform. You can make a difference!

TAADAS tailored the above suggestions for our advocates from
Tips for Advocates from Treatment Advocacy Center (www.psychlaw.org).