

Insights from the Field for PCAs and BHSAs: Legislative Engagement Strategies

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One of the goals of the Delta Center for a Thriving Safety Net is to build the knowledge and ability of state associations to ensure that changes in incentives and care systems meet the goals and needs of individuals and families. Peer-to-peer learning among grantees— collaborative teams composed of primary care associations (PCAs) and state behavioral health associations (BHSAs) from select states— is one key way the Delta Center achieves this goal.

PCAs and BHSAs recognize that engaging state legislators are key to fostering health policy and care systems that are equitable and better meet the needs of individuals and families. The following insights are a synthesis of discussions at a “Legislator Engagement Session” at a September 2022 Delta Center Convening held in New Mexico. Considering what advice they would give to each other or other PCA and BHSA peers, Delta Center grantees elevated the following strategies to educate legislators, navigate political dynamics, build champions, and engage consumers.

1. Orient Yourself

Know the policy landscape. Read the upcoming legislation to familiarize yourself with the current “pulse” and consider where your efforts might best fit. Align this with topics that legislators might be overlooking and consider where you can be of assistance so that the partnership is mutually beneficial.

Find common ground in different sectors. Identify points of connection with potential allies. For example, entities in the housing and healthcare spaces could collaborate to better understand the implications of expanding telehealth on houseless individuals.

Become familiar with opposing viewpoints. Gain knowledge about different perspectives that will help strengthen your position.

2. Determine Who To Engage

Define what “champion” means to you. Account for the context of your state’s sociopolitical climate. Make sure that these individuals can speak to the firsthand realities of the topic you hope to address.

Look into individuals on committees. The right people can advocate for your policy goals. They don’t have to be in the health field to have an interest in the issues you are trying to address.

Consider champions outside of legislators. This could include community stakeholders, community health workers, community members, community-based organizations, and individuals. These individuals bring valuable lived experience to the table and can share their own stories, as well as move into influential roles of advocacy and education.

3. Engage New Champions

Network to find champions. Connect with people in your current network who can refer you to others who can help your cause. Also, attend town hall meetings— this is a great place to connect with individuals in local or state government and health departments.

Reach out to legislators who are passionate about the issues you want to focus on. Understand their core values and how they align with yours. Use clear, concise messaging to prevent misalignment. Look for opportunities to collaborate on shared goals.

Approach future champions with humility. Educate yourself on their work and provide learning opportunities for them as well.

4. Invest in Long-Term Relationships

Internal considerations. Find a way to balance your organization’s internal priorities and goals before entering into a new partnership. This guarantees that you are ready to invest time into any given partnership and ensure it is a mutually beneficial relationship.

External considerations. Integrate the process of participating in the relationship into your long-term strategy. Support legislators by rewarding champion behavior, such as “advocacy awards” and recognition. Moreover, be their champion when appropriate. Support other champions by providing tools and opportunities for engagement. This could include trainings, classes, and facilitating multi-stakeholder groups.

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