

## GRASSROOTS LOBBYING

Legislators vote on thousands of issues during each session of the General Assembly. They count on their constituents and lobbyists to provide the information they need to make an informed decision on which position to take. Your role in the VCA effort is to help provide them with the information they need to make decisions that agree with the VCA position. Here are some general rules to follow as you do that:

- **Be prepared.** Know your topic. Of course, you know more about school counselor and LPC issues than anyone else does.
- **Make an appointment and be on time, but be prepared to wait.** Hopefully you have made an appointment to talk with your delegate and senator. If not, you will most likely talk with his/her legislative aide. Not to worry--aides know their legislators well and can usually get the ear of the members.
- **Aides and legislators are extremely busy.** Plan to talk for five minutes or less. Do not be too informal
- **Stick to the issue.** Tell which bill(s) you are supporting or opposing. Explain your reasons for your support or opposition.
- **Present both sides of the issue, but explain why the VCA position is better public policy and why the opponents' arguments are flawed.** Try not to criticize your opponents; just indicate why you believe their position is misguided or based on incorrect information.
- **Answer any questions the aide or legislator might have.** If you don't know the answer, say so, and promise to get back with them with the answer. Or tell them that you'll consult with the lobbyist who will follow up with answers, and follow through on that.. Therefore, the next statement is obvious:
- **Be honest.** Don't fudge the truth. Your future credibility with a legislator, as well as the credibility of VCA, depends on honest and accurate information. You can be sure that if you intentionally or unintentionally mislead a legislator, the legislator will find out. This creates a very great risk that the legislator will not believe anything else that you or your professional association asserts.
- **Talk about good public policy, about what's best for school children or clients.** Try not to appear to be self-serving (i.e., what's best for you—keep the focus if at all possible on the client/children).
- **If possible, give an example or anecdote to illustrate your point.** Often, stories are more powerful than statistics or facts. But, try to avoid using examples that may raise more questions than they address. For example, steer clear of any example that is not commonly accepted as a standard of care in the counseling community or that may have been controversial in the lay press.
- **If your legislator doesn't agree with your position, pleasantly agree to disagree.** You might ask if there is any information you could provide that would change his or her mind. Do not get angry, frustrated, or threaten the legislator in any way (i.e. "I won't vote for you."). There will be a time in the future where you want the legislator to agree with you on another issue, and if you have burned your bridges, you may lose any future opportunity.
- **Listen carefully to the legislator's statement of his position on this issue.** Some legislators are masters at sounding like they agree with you when, in fact, that is not what they have said. Do not construe general statements (i.e. "I've always liked counselors") to be support for your position. The only way to know the legislator's position is to ask directly (i.e. "Will you vote for (or against) this bill?") and then listen carefully to the answer. Many legislators will defer until they "see the language of the bill" or "hear from the other side." Let them know you will keep in touch and look forward to working with them in their home districts.
- **Always express your gratitude, regardless of the outcome.** Thank the legislator or staff person for his/her time, and ask when you should follow-up (generally 2-4 weeks later). After the visit, send a thank you note or e-mail message referencing the key point(s) of the meeting; forward any pertinent follow-up materials; and maintain contact (offering your voluntary services can be useful, e.g. reviewing bills, acting as a resource, etc.).