

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATIONS

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The lightbulb went on for me about the importance of legislative advocacy because of a sweet little girl named Sally. I started teaching special education shortly after the law mandating special education was signed into law in Illinois. Illinois law became reality over 8 years before Federal law. My first teaching job after receiving my master's degree in special education and getting over 56 additional hours in applied behavior analysis was teaching in a classroom for children with autism. Sally came into my class with multiple disabilities for the first time when she was 10 years old. Until there was a law that said she had a right to an education, Sally stayed at home. Her mother of 10 lived in rural southern Illinois. Every year her mother would take her to school, but the principal would look at her and tell her mother she couldn't come to school.

Sally's story will always remind me of the importance of laws that protect children and adults with disabilities. From that point forward I knew I needed to never take laws of granted, I had to know the law, and I had to work for passage of key legislation. Thus began my journey in legislative advocacy. In the early 80s when they were trying to eliminate special education, two of my colleagues and I set up meetings in the White House with the Chief of Staff. We visited with numerous members of Congress, and we even rode the trolley with Senator Bob Dole. Yes, elevator speeches are important. At another time they were trying to take away the rights of children with emotional/behavioral disorders. Several of us stormed the capitol. We were successful because we didn't give up and we took the heat for what we were doing.

I was blessed to become the Legislative Chair for DKG Illinois for five biennia, if memory serves me correctly. I had the privilege of monitoring statewide legislation and published a regular summary of bills that were pending in our Illinois General Assembly. I wanted our members to be informed. I still publish that document on a regular basis for other organizations and share it with others who are interested. As Legislative Chair, we brought DKG members to Springfield and met with legislators. I will never forget that the night before one of our legislative trainings, I lost my voice, and it didn't come back the day of the training. My husband, who was very active in policy making, had to take over and I must say he did a phenomenal job.

I was also fortunate to plan several "Donate A Day" sessions in Illinois when people came to the capitol in June (that was when they met until the end of June). We trained people on how to talk with legislators. We then went to the Capitol to meet with legislators. Those were great trainings.

Is it exciting to see the legislature in action? I remember a physical fight on the floor of the Illinois General Assembly. I remember sitting in the gallery of the Illinois General Assembly with my husband until midnight on June 30 when they would stop the clock because they had

not gotten the business of the session finished. They hadn't gotten the budget bill done and could not go home, thus they had to go through an over 1000 page bill that most had not read.

I learned several lessons during these years:

1. You have to read a bill. You never know what might be in it.
2. You have to be prepared for criticism from those who don't share your beliefs. Sometimes the battles get ugly, but you have to be strong and stand up for what you believe in. I have been called names, threatened, and ostracized but at the end of the day, you have to look in the mirror and know you did what was right.
3. You have to know your facts and you have to know what the enemy is saying.
4. And speaking of enemies, your legislators are not always the enemy. I have worked with legislators on some issues where we shared a common belief.
5. You need to communicate with legislators frequently. Attend town halls, make calls. You want legislators to see you as an expert on an issue.
6. You are never nasty to a legislator. You just remember the information at the polls.
7. You have to be persistent. Remember the GPO/WEF law took 42 years to pass and be signed. While that is an extreme, we cannot pass legislation overnight and must remain persistent.
8. Share your story with policymakers, then provide the data.

I firmly believe that communication is the key. We must keep our members informed. We give people critical information and let them decide themselves where they stand on an issue.

It is critical that we know the law and when people try to tell you something is in the law, you determine for yourself whether what they are saying is true. You have to do your homework.

Recently I was in an IEP assisting a parent and someone came into the meeting and told the group that they had developed a policy that was in accord with the law, and they could not provide the services the child needed. Since one of the books I have written is on Special Education Law and I taught courses on special education law, I knew the person was wrong and while I wanted to say that, I simply said, "Could you show me your policy and the citation in the law?" On that note, the person left the meeting, must have made a call, and came back and said "Oh, we're looking into that more."

Information is power and to be successful in impacting policy, we must know what the law says, advocate for its implementation, and continue to monitor issues in our everyday lives. We must have hope we can make a difference and together we can.