Take it to the District

Local Advocacy Forum Tips

"All politics is local," said Tip O'Neill, former, long-time speaker of the House. To have maximum grassroots impact on your state budget and legislation there is no substitute for county and regional level contact with state legislators, county and municipal authorities. A forum is an opportunity to connect mental health stakeholders to state and local officials in the home district.

By attending, listening and having the opportunity to respond, elected officials will:

- Understand the issues more clearly,
- Observe the range of their constituents who care about mental health issues,
- Have an opportunity to express their views.

Start Early

- At least four months of preparation are necessary to do it right.
- Book the venue. The best places are free, well-known public spaces such as libraries or community centers. A pricey location will send a message that you are willing to spend money on impressing officials and may have the opposite effect.
- The venue should be just large enough to hold the expected audience. Better to have standing room only than rows of empty seats.
- Keep refreshments simple. Finger foods and non-alcoholic beverages help people relax. The main focus should be on the message, not the food. If you have a tight budget, food is not necessary.

Work in Coalition

- The forum will have a greater draw if it is hosted by a number of allied organizations. The message needs to be, "The mental health community is united: These [issues] [bills] [budget cuts] are important and will deeply impact our members and clients."
- NAMI is the voice of the people. We are essential to mental health coalitions because we represent families and individuals directly affected by mental illness.
- Recommended coalition partners include, but are not limited to, community mental health and addiction treatment organizations, mental health advocacy organizations, associations for mental health professionals (social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, etc), hospitals and others.
- Industry partners from pharmaceutical or insurance companies should only be included as associate members—without a vote. It is important not to appear to serve the interests of corporations.

Craft the Message

- Develop a "white paper" or policy statement to provide in-depth information on the issues. Emphasize the price we pay for cutting mental health services in terms of costly emergency room visits, hospitalization, school drop-outs, children in state custody, incarceration, homelessness and suicide. Include an executive summary of no more than one page.

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- Develop a brief slide presentation, based on the white paper, stating the policy or budget concerns. Include supporting data and recommendations.
- Write a press release with "what, when, where" information and a good "hook." Example: "Looming state budget cuts will hurt Anytown residents with mental illness and their families."

Invite Officials

- Send a letter of invitation by U.S. mail to officials. Follow up with a phone call. It may take several calls to reach the scheduler. If the official is not available, request a designee. Divide the follow-up call list between volunteers or coalition partners to share the load.
- Invite state senators and representatives from your district and surrounding areas. Be sure to send an invitation to all legislators in a district to avoid appearing partisan. If the forum is during campaign season, invite all candidates for a particular office.
- Invite state administration officials from your mental health authority, Medicaid and other appropriate departments.
- Local officials should include city and county mayors, the sheriffs city council persons, the police chief, court officials, school superintendents, the chamber of commerce president, etc.

Invite Members, Allies and Non-Traditional Partners

- Invite representatives from stakeholder groups affected by mental health policy.
  - **Suggestions:** Emergency room physicians, police, sheriffs, jail administrators, local health departments, schools, child welfare agencies, chambers of commerce, local housing authorities
- What allied organizations care about mental health services and supports? Invite them!
  - **Suggestions:** Mental health advocacy organizations, community mental health and addiction service agencies, private hospitals.

Invite the Media

- Look for reporters who cover mental health issues in local newspapers (including online), radio and TV.
- Send a press release, then follow up by telephone and/or email with the reporters you want to cover the issue. Often a personal invitation makes the difference.
- NAMI members are ideal for follow up, because reporters are always looking for a story or quote from someone who is personally affected.

Deliver the Message

- Committee or coalition members should be on hand to greet officials as they arrive. Invite them to sign-in and provide handouts.
- Spokesperson(s) chosen by the committee/coalition should present the slide show.
- The spokesperson may facilitate a discussion with the audience.
- Prepare discussion questions, talking points and supporting information in advance.
- Committee/coalition members must also be prepared to support the message, discussing the impact on their population.
- Consider asking legislators and officials to serve on a panel responding to the presentation.

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Thank, Debrief and Plan

- Send thank you notes or emails to officials. This is another chance to emphasize your message. The most effective thank you notes are simple and sincere.
- Meet with your committee or coalition to discuss how things went, what to improve for the future. Plan next steps.

Keep up the Pressure

- Visit state legislators during advocacy day at the Capitol. Emphasize the forum message.
- Until the gavel comes down for the year, encourage your members to consistently contact legislators by letter, telephone, email and face-to-face. Urge support for your

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