

Legislative Advocacy Workshop
Judy Park, National Legislative Director

How You Can Be An Effective Advocate With Your Congressman

I think it's interesting the actual words of the topic that Helen chose "How You Can Be An Effective Advocate With Your Congressman" because when it comes to legislative advocacy "YOU" is the operative word, and **YOUR** Member of Congress. Everybody goes around now at certain times saying – This isn't all about you. Well, *when it comes to legislation it IS all about you. It's about all of the "YOU's" that you have in your chapter doing their bit to contact YOUR Members of Congress.*

I stress "YOUR" again because periodically you will hear someone say, "My Congressman doesn't do anything for us, but I contacted all 364 other ones." Who cares? Certainly those Congressmen don't. They're not going to pay any attention to it and I can assure you that e-mails coming in from anywhere but a member's district are automatically blocked. They're not getting through. So, while it might make the sender feel quite righteous and responsible for getting out their message to every member of the House and/or Senate it is having no effect whatsoever.

The people that you have some power with, and you have more power than you know, are your own one Representative and your own two Senators. But I can tell you that there are NARFE members across the country who think they have one Representative and one Senator. They're mixed up and missing one in the context.

You have three people to concentrate on and it's usually one or two at a time. Because usually we are either trying to do some kind of movement in the House where you have one Representative, or the Senate and you're simply spreading that message to your own two Senators.

I think what you have to remember in starting the advocacy issue with your Member and your Senators is that **YOU are the constituent. YOU are the voter. Those are the first two things that are important to you and that second point is particularly important to YOUR Member of Congress. The other one is that these Members of Congress are there to represent YOU.** Again, use the operative word throughout this.

There is a bit of "It isn't all about you" in this because you have to realize when you're approaching members of Congress that they represent you, but they also represent a lot of other people. And among the universal people they do represent are many different interests, and sometimes those interests are at odds with each other. Very often you'll find mutual interests, but at times when there are interests that are at odds your Member of Congress has to balance those and try to be a negotiator in many instances. But in any instance, he has to make a decision somewhere along the line. And **the decision on the conflicting issue is going to come down to the point of where the most political pressure is coming from, along with the Member's good judgment and knowledge of the issues,** at least one hopes.

But, as Tip O'Neil said, along with some others, "All politics is local" and that is absolutely true. **What you're advocating needs to be brought into some kind of perspective for your community; your Congressional District. How does it help in this District; how many people does it help in this District and would it hurt anybody in the District. These are all things you need to bring into your presentation when you go to visit a Member of Congress.**

I'm talking mainly about Congressional visits, because I think it's an area where we were once very good but we've slacked off. It could be simply because of this time when everybody is so busy and everything is so congested you're just not taking the time to go to the Member's office to make yourself known. **But when you do go, make yourself known as an interested, active, concerned constituent. Don't get yourself known as a pest. There is a difference between being persistent and being a pest. You can be persistent, but once you're tagged as a pest, you've got one big hurdle to get over before you even get your message out.**

***YOU* need to establish a rapport with the Congressional office in your District or the one closest to you. Usually most members of Congress have a couple of local offices. Get to know the people in the offices. Because they are not the Representatives or the Senators themselves does not mean they have no clout or effectiveness. Very often they have the most clout there could be, because they are the ones who are reporting to the legislators what's being heard from their own constituents. They are the eyes and ears in most cases. Remember that these Members of Congress are dealing with very open and widely diverse constituencies with differing needs and wants. They are also in Washington looking at thousands of bills proposing different things ranging from issues like Homeland Security to the naming of a Post Office in their District.**

So they have a lot to know about and **they need to know that when it comes to issues concerning the federal retirement system, Federal Employees Health Benefits Program, Social Security and any number of issues in which we're involved, that they can turn to YOU for CREDIBLE information and background – data, statistics, how it might impact your federal colleagues across the country and particularly what kind of an impact it would have in your particular District. But, the minute you start giving off- the-cuff comments or overstating an issue, just like being a pest, you're going to lose. Credibility is the most important thing you can have in dealing with a Member of Congress. *YOU* have to be trustworthy – they have to know that they can rely on the facts and figures you are giving. They don't want to go out, any more than anybody else, and make a comment based on something you've told them and make a fool of themselves. You don't want to do that— they don't want to do that.**

We do have the facts and figures and lots of information available for you on how this will impact people. **Now our job in the National Office, to a great extent, is to compile this type of information for your use in your own Congressional Districts. We get a lot of it out to you in NARFE Magazine. There is a lot of information in the Congressional Directory, there is a lot of it on the website, but if you're not finding a point or a figure or data that you think might be helpful in presenting your arguments, call us and let us find it. Don't just go out there with something that the guy next door told you that sounds a little strange, but sounds like it might make an impact, because if that's wrong we've lost it right there.**

Also, one of the things that concerns me is when we call people in a certain area at times and say – We were just talking to Congressman Brown and he seems to have some sympathy for this position, but he hasn't heard from anyone in the District. I hate it when they tell me that – I just hate it. It's embarrassing and it means that I'm not doing my job and that none of us are doing our jobs. But at any rate when they tell me that and we call our members and say -- you all need to start contacting Congressman Brown, you would be surprised how many times they say – he/she doesn't usually vote our way so we're just not bothering. They're never going to vote your way again if you're not bothering. And time and again—I know Dan Adcock has told

you this, I know you've seen it in NARFE Magazine—that there's never a “last vote” and “No” only means “No” now, it doesn't mean tomorrow, or the next day or the next.

Remember I said don't be a pest, but be persistent? You know and I know that you can sometimes be worn down by persistence. If you're annoyed by a pest – you're going to tune out. **But persistence, and persistence brought to a volume by a number of different voices – a number of constituents in your District delivering the same or a very similar message, is what is going to be the turning point – the deciding factor here. YOU can't just say I'm going to let my First Vice President take care of this issue. YOU have to get involved. Now that doesn't mean that the whole chapter has to go trooping into a local office on a regular basis. In fact that's not a very good idea, though you probably wouldn't get many people to go with you anyway, unfortunately; but officers of a chapter, interested individuals in a chapter, a small visiting group setting up an appointment with good lead time.**

Some people will say-- Well, we called and said we wanted an appointment on Tuesday, and they said the Congressman wasn't going to be there so obviously he doesn't care. What? If someone called you and said they were dropping by to see you on Tuesday at 2 p.m. and you have an appointment for something else at that point, you wouldn't be there either. **YOU need to give some lead time; YOU need to tell them who is going to be in the group; that you're not going to need much time when you're there and you're going to go in there with one or two issues maximum—never more than two issues. Take papers with YOUR specific points, for or against the bill, that you're advocating at that time and leave the papers with them. [These point papers are available on the NARFE Web Site www.narfe.org under “Legislation” on the left hand side of the web site.] YOU have a spokesperson in this visiting group; don't let everybody else in the group all at once bring up a side issue that's of personal interest to them.** They can certainly make arrangements for the Congressman's office to know about this personal issue, but in this brief NARFE meeting, it's not the time to do it.

YOU need to stay on message and YOU need also to make sure that the Congressman or the Congressman's representative stays on message. I've been in meetings when you've gone in to talk about one thing and all at once they're moving you into a different subject. That's not helpful to you, but you can bring that right back each time. If you're in there to talk about FEHBP Premium Conversion and they're talking about Part D Medicare Plan, just say – Well, that's of interest, but then go right back to Premium Conversion. Don't be deferred. That's quite a tactic and it can work – just don't let it.

Also don't go in there as an adversary. **YOU're an advocate, not an adversary.** If you go in there on the defensive, assuming you're not going to be listened to – you're not going to be listened to. And the louder your voice gets, the less you're going to be heard. The kind of volume you want is with numbers of people, not your own voice shouting. Always put yourself in the place of the individual that you are talking to. You don't like to be yelled at; you don't like to be threatened; you don't like pests; all of these things are the same for all of us. Just make sure that you cross out all the things that you don't like to have to deal with, and then deal with the Member of Congress or the staff person in a polite but firm manner, just as you would anybody else. You have every right.

And, that's a thing you have to remember, too. There are people I know who are afraid to go into a legislator's office because they think the legislator has some kind of holy power. They're just like you and me; in fact you and the other people in the community gave them this particular job. So YOU have both a right and a responsibility to be giving

them your point of view and *YOUR* feelings on these issues. It's really simple if you keep this to the level of just courteous dealings as with someone in business or any other factor of your life. But, remember that you have to bring your issue to a little more attention or to a little higher point of attention than the multitude of other issues being brought before this busy individual.

The other thing that we need to do is simply remember to thank people who do support you. Also, let them know if you're disappointed. That doesn't mean yelling and screaming or calling them names. Just let them know that you are disappointed. But don't let it stop you from going back. Be persistent.

Sometimes, instead of going in and saying – here's what I'd like you to do for me, go in and say—is there anything we can do for you—or how can NARFE be of help? Find issues of common interest even if it's just a local issue. It doesn't have to be a specific federal employee or retiree NARFE issue; there might be a local issue that's high on their agenda right then that you agree with the Member on, and can help with that issue. Maybe you can help by having volunteers in there once in awhile.

And, *YOU* can also get involved in the campaigns of the individuals - the incumbents or the challengers. I can tell you that in many instances they are particularly looking for people from the postal service because it's those people who know how to get the best rates and how to get some of these mailings out. There are all kinds of things you can do to help in the course of a Representative's or Senator's term of office, and also when they are campaigning for re-election, which is all the time. See if *YOU* can help in the campaign of a candidate of your choice. It can be fun, but also it can be to *YOUR* advantage later on, because that member of Congress is going to listen first, schedule first and pay attention first to somebody that they know, and whom they know has been helpful to them.

There was a time when NARFE members were very active in campaigns throughout the country - particularly friendly Members of Congress. I'm not hearing or seeing much of that anymore. But, it's one of the best ways you can get involved and it won't take a lot of time unless you want it to take a lot of time. Also, if you support Joe Brown, and 20 other people in the chapter support Susan Smith, it doesn't matter. **Just get involved. It also gets *YOU* involved in the whole political scene in the local District and that, too, is helpful.**

We are always telling you to see if *YOU* can get a Member of Congress or their staff member to come talk at a chapter meeting--maybe once a year or every two years. They may not be able to show up for your meeting because Congress meets during the week. Be flexible when you are scheduling a meeting, and get enough people together, maybe several chapters in the District, to make it worth their while to come. It may be a legislator's staff person who comes to speak. Do not underestimate the power and the influence of a staff person. Don't think because they haven't been elected to office they're of no use to you. You couldn't be further from the truth. I can tell you when bills are marked up on the Hill, or bills are being written on the Hill, it's not the elected members who are sitting in there doing it. It's the staff that is getting it ready for the final action of their Members of Congress. Staff can be every bit as helpful, if not more so, than meeting with the Members themselves. Be flexible when setting up these schedules and, as I said earlier, give them plenty of lead-time.

Make sure on a fairly regular basis that *YOU* are touching base with that office for one reason or another. Fairly regularly does not mean once a week. That goes into

becoming a pest category. But, enough to show that you're not going to give up – that you're going to be persistent, that you do want to be listened to.

I believe that we have made Congressional contact for our membership at large as easy as we possibly can; with e-mails that can be accessed and messages that have already been written for you, if you want to use those in the Legislative Action Center on the NARFE website. There is the toll-free NARFE number to Capitol Hill, which means a member anywhere throughout the country can use this number and get directly through to his or her Representative or Senators. The number is 1-866-220-0044. In the future that number and the other toll-free numbers we have will be printed in every issue of NARFE Magazine. It's always going to be available to you. So, *YOU* can use the toll-free number, *YOU* have e-mail access directly from our own website if you don't want to find it yourself, and also *YOU* can come onto the Legislative Action Center if you don't know how to use the local phone book to find the address and phone number of their District offices.

Keep the issues to no more than two at a time. A Member of Congress from Virginia with a huge federal constituency always votes our way, has always been considered a good friend. A group went in to his office a couple of years ago and they had NARFE's printed legislative program with them. They put it down on his desk and said to him – this is what we want you to support. He said, "Get out of here!" They were just shocked. They wondered why he was turning against them all of a sudden. Well, he wasn't turning against them. As he told them – I can't promise that I'll do all this. **You tell me what's most important to you now and we'll work on that. Don't give them this laundry list of what you want. It's one or two issues of the day, and you know what those are: Premium Conversion and GPO/WEP.**

In talking to the National Office yesterday, there's going to be a hearing in a Social Security Subcommittee on Wednesday, June 9th, by Congressman McCreery on Mandatory Coverage of Social Security of State and Local Employees. They will also look at the impact that would have on GPO and WEP. This is not the overall Social Security Reform hearing, but focuses particularly on mandatory coverage of state and locals who are now uncovered. GPO and WEP will also be addressed in there because they are affected. There are expected to be more specific GPO/WEP hearings later as well.

As you make these Congressional visits or think about Congressional advocacy or talk about it in your chapter meetings, the main thing to remember is – it is all about *YOU* and *YOUR* Member of Congress. It's about communication; establishing the rapport between you and your Member, between NARFE and the Member and his or her staff. It's simply being in contact, getting your message across and being involved in this whole political process. If you remember *YOU* and *YOURS* I think you'll find it a lot easier as you go about this most important job of the Association.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

John Weininger, Chapter 73, San Bernardino: I'm a representative of Congressman Joe Baca and I want to share with the membership here, that when we get telephone calls either for support or non-support of a bill, we record it and at the end of every day we forward that to Washington. I can tell you as far as our member Lee Manak is concerned – she has an open door to our Congressman and he listens to her. I can tell you one instance Lee called me to say that

our Congressman wasn't signed onto a bill. I called Washington that evening and got a call back that he now signed onto the bill. I can tell you it works by calling your Congressional office and they record it and notify the Washington office.

Judy Park: I think that's the importance of the District offices. They really are the base, the eyes and ears for the Member of Congress. Obviously one person can't be listening to everything.

Diana Motta, Salinas Chapter 1496: When I go to the Legislative website I've found when I try to send my letter, more specifically to Senator Boxer, is that she won't accept those letters. She directs you to her website. Is that still the same or has that changed?

Judy Park: That is the same. More and more members are going to communication through the website, not through a direct e-mail address. It's becoming a more prevalent way of doing it. They will tell you that you have to go to their website and send them a message that way.

Clair Smith, Chapter 68 Bakersfield: We talked yesterday about coalitions. I have been in touch with the local president of MOAA in Bakersfield. Would it be the right thing to do for myself and the president of MOAA and maybe a couple of other people to meet with Congressman Thomas' staff - two different organizations going in it at the same time.

Judy Park: Should be very helpful

Clair Smith: How about signing a letter?

Judy Park: Yes, there are a number of instances where we've done joint letters and we've particularly done them on Premium Conversion with MOAA. The president of MOAA and President Fallis sent the legislators a joint letter. Just make sure you start

Pauline Bennett, Encinitas Chapter 456: How can we get these bills out of committee? We have all the votes we need to pass them if they could get to the floor of the House and the Senate. This is GPO/WEP, I believe and I think I read it in NARFE that it won't be released from committee. That was probably in the last Congress.

Judy: It was in the last Congress and it may happen again in this Congress. I can tell you that if I knew how you could do it we would have done it ahead of you. There isn't a magic bullet.

You have heard, and you will hear again, about a Discharge Petition. Discharge Petitions sound marvelous. Theoretically, they get around the Chairman of the Committee. They are highly political and they are a way, essentially, for the minority party to end-run the majority party and it seldom happens. There have been Discharge Petitions as part of the Congressional procedure for 70 years—seven of them successful in that period of time. The last one was several years ago with Campaign Finance Reform right after the Enron debacle. A Discharge Petition is not a magic bullet, and what happens to a great extent is you lose a lot of the support you already had from people in the majority party.

There is only a Discharge Petition in the House; there isn't one in the Senate. In the House, particularly with the margin between the majority and the minority higher than it was in the past, you're not going to reach the numbers needed, 218, more than half the House.

You're absolutely right—If in the last Congress everyone who had co-sponsored that bill had voted for it, it would have easily passed. There is nothing that mandates that being a co-sponsor of a bill requires him or her to vote for it. Most would, and they would have to answer

to their constituents, I would think, if they didn't. But it is still a body where the committee and the committee chairs have a great deal of power in working with the leadership of their own parties. The thing to do right now is work on other members of the House Ways & Means Committee and let them bring the pressure on to Bill Thomas from within the Committee. That's about the best we can do at this point.

Dick Millington, Chico Chapter 1245: You and your staff put out an evaluation and voting record periodically of all of our Congressmen and Senators. This has bugged me for a long time. When it comes time to vote every two years, every six years, I wonder how many people in this room look at their interests in your publishing of the voting record. I see some people vote against one of our Senators, yet she has a 100 percent voting record for their personal issues. I feel people are not using the evaluation you've put out on a regular basis.

Judy: We put it out because we think it might be helpful. It takes a lot of work to get that voting analysis done, particularly the compilation from going back as far as the 97th Congress for those Members who are still in office. We try to give you as broad a picture of their overall support as possible. And you know also that we don't use co-sponsorship in that rating. We use votes alone.

Maybe they have a very strong reason for not supporting the person who has given 100% NARFE support, but we've even run into situations where we've gone out requesting comments for a NARFE-PAC in support of a campaign. And someone will come back and say—no, don't give any money to them; they've never supported us. And you say to them – well, only 90%. These are people who have a preconceived idea of this particular candidate and maybe it has to do with something other than NARFE.

We can't control how a person votes, but when it comes to whether or not there will be some support from NARFE-PAC we're certainly obligated to set the record straight.

Joanna Selby, Chapter 1282 Albany, currently I am the State Legislative Chair: I agree with Judy's remarks on how to be a good, effective advocate. I've always described that – if there is a balloon and an Assemblyperson or Senator is holding the balloon and an advocate comes along and pushes it, then you will change the shape of it. When the issue is coming up that's when the legislator pays attention. He goes to his Chief of Staff who says they have received hundreds of letters about the issue. Once an issue is on the front burner it becomes a big issue. The legislators want to hear from the coalitions and the advocates who will explain what they want. That's why it is so important for everyone to be an advocate. We should use this power and exercise it.

John Weininger, Chapter 73 San Bernardino: I want to caution the membership here – when you visit your Congressman, he might at that time tell you he will support the bill. But, when the bill comes up there are a lot of trailers added to that bill that he does not agree with. And, he'll vote against that bill. He made a firm decision to vote for the bill, but due to the fact that trailers come in on this bill at the end of the bill section, he votes against this bill. Don't get mad at him. Let him explain why he voted against the bill after he told you he would vote for it.

Chuck Wood, Chapter 1680: Most of the real decisions are not made on the floor of the House or Senate. They are made in committees and subcommittees. If our Congressman is not

on one of the critical committees that are considering our bills how can we get them to get the bills out of the committee?

Judy: I think the best thing again is you have to communicate just with your own Members, but ask them in these instances to use their influence with colleagues on the committee with jurisdiction.

Liz Chaney, Chapter 188, Riverside: She wanted to thank Judy for mentioning one of the greatest ways to get the eyes and ears of any elected official which is by volunteering. A campaign worker, if it's a first campaign, they never forget you. If it's a continuing campaign it just becomes easier. I'm looking at all these people who have a few hours to spare, which is a great source of campaign volunteering. You can spend two hours, or ten days or the whole campaign. A lot of the members end up working for the elected officials and so you know staff, etc. People don't usually think of that as a way of being an advocate.

Judy Park: Absolutely. It works for everybody.