



How to Advocate in a Time of Social Distancing

Legislators Say Virtual Meetings Allow Them to Say Yes More Often

Now more than ever, during the COVID-19 pandemic, PAs should be advocating for the profession, sharing their stories with legislators about the critical role PAs play in healthcare delivery. And, as experienced PA advocates know well, face-to-face meetings with legislators and staff are the best way to build relationships with decisionmakers and to advance PA-positive legislation at the state and federal levels. But recently, advocates have had to find ways to build and keep up these important relationships when in-person meetings are not an option.

Legislators and advocates across the country been remarkably nimble in pivoting to virtual advocacy engagements in the face of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#). And, the legislators have found that online activities have major benefits. Offices say that virtual meetings and virtual townhalls using platforms such as Zoom have shown to be just as valuable as face-to-face meetings. In fact, these virtual meetings allow legislators to see more constituents in less time, extending their reach. A chief of staff from a Pennsylvania Congressional office told me recently, “In-person meetings tend to take longer due to niceties and small talk; we’ve found virtual meetings are more direct and to-the point. My boss prefers them now, actually, because it gives us the opportunity to say yes more often.”

A recent survey by the Public Affairs Council revealed that 83% of Congressional offices anticipate they will continue to engage advocates virtually, even after the pandemic is over, even if in-person meetings can begin to resume. So, while PA advocates should continue to seek in-person opportunities to highlight the role of PAs in communities once it is safe to do so, advocates should also absolutely embrace the new digital norm. Here are some tips to make sure you are getting your message across effectively.

Written communications

Written communications, especially direct emails but also web forms and old-fashioned paper letters, remain an effective advocacy tool, if used correctly. What does that mean? It means made PERSONAL. The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) asked Hill offices how many constituent letters it took to move an undecided legislator to take a position. They answered that to make an impact it took 100 impersonal form emails to begin to make an impact, whereas it took only 10 personalized emails, especially when they were from a constituent the office knew or had a relationship with. In other words, communications that contain personal stories or examples from trusted constituents are the most effective. More information is available in the [Advocacy Action Center](#).

In addition to personalizing your letter, be sure to keep the following in mind as well:

- When sending an email directly to a staffer, the subject line is VERY important; consider stating your “ask” (the action you want the legislator to take) there.
- Most messages will be read on a phone, so keep it brief and keep attachments to a minimum.
- Consider sending your email at night or on the weekend; in other words, meeting-free times when many staff are scrolling through their phones.

Virtual meetings

Virtual meetings are not *that* different than in-person meetings, other than the fact that there are video screens between you and the person you’re speaking to. Many of the same rules apply for meetings by Zoom as they do for meetings face-to-face: know your audience, be clear about the “ask”, share a personal story or example, bring/send [supporting materials](#), and make a local connection ([make it relevant to the legislator](#)).

When using technology to meet, there are additional considerations to make to ensure your meeting is high-level and effective:

- Test the technology before the meeting to lessen glitches
- Raise webcam to eye-level for the best angle
- Use a good microphone
- Make sure your lighting is adequate; natural light is best
- Dress the part; just because we’re all at home doesn’t mean you can lose your professional edge
- Turn off notifications and try to limit background interruptions (pets and children)
- Avoid multi-tasking during your meeting; put away your phone, close other programs on your computer and focus 100% on what the legislator or staffer is saying.

Virtual Townhall Meetings

Many legislators will be turning to virtual [townhall meetings](#) this summer, if they haven’t already. Townhall meetings are an easy way to reach a large number of constituents at once. The realities of group webinars, though, mean there are key points to keep in mind before participating in a large group Zoom gathering.

- Get invited – you can’t participate if you’re unaware it is happening, so reach out to your legislator and get on their mailing list for upcoming events.
- ALWAYS ask a question and start your question by introducing yourself: “My name is Jane and I’m a PA in your community.” Be sure to establish your credentials for the audience.
- Recognize you’re on a BIG stage – there will likely be lots of people in the Zoom frame. Be ready to get right to your point.
- PRAISE the legislator –even for just listening.

Letters to the Editor

In addition to written communication and meetings, letters to the editor are an excellent way to raise the profile of your issue with decisionmakers and the general public. If possible, tie the issue back to a story that ran recently in the publication. For example, an article on healthcare providers working overtime during the pandemic can be referenced in a letter that highlights the work of the many PAs in your local hospital. Keep your letters very short (100-200 words). Be sure to name the legislator if at all possible, since they have staff who do press searches looking for the boss' name [in the media](#).

Finally, don't forget **social media**. The CMF survey results showed that it only takes 10-30 similar comments on an issue for an office to take notice.

Don't let social distancing keep you from making your voice heard. Be an advocate for the profession. PAs have a powerful story to tell, and legislators are just waiting to hear you tell it.

For questions or to get involved, contact Kristin Butterfield, director, AAPA Grassroots and Political Advocacy, kbutterfield@aapa.org.

You May Also Like

[Grassroots Advocacy](#)

[Townhall Meetings](#) (requires member log-in)

[Connect with Legislators at Home](#)

