



How to Build and Maintain Relationships with State Officials

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States will play a significant role in health care reform implementation. The *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*, signed into law on March 23, 2010, includes a range of state requirements and options. Some components of the law must be developed and implemented quickly, while others will involve a complex set of state decisions and long-term planning.

Since much of the success of health reform depends upon implementation by the states, it is critical that advocates develop and cultivate relationships with key state officials who will be making important decisions in order to ensure the consumer perspective is considered.

This paper identifies some of the key state contacts that will prove critical during the upcoming implementation period. It also shares suggestions and best practices for developing strong, ongoing relationships with the wide range of state officials, departments and agencies that will make key implementation decisions and can serve as strong allies for consumers and advocates.

Identifying key state officials

The first step in this process is to identify the offices and officials that will be most involved in the implementation decisions in your state. Identify the contacts in those offices that you need to know in order to have a voice in the implementation processes. Below, you will find suggestions for identifying and making contact with those key people.

Governor's office

Often the governor's office will coordinate health policy across the state government. It is important to identify those staff within the governor's office charged with overseeing health policy. These are not usually public figures. If you don't know who the appropriate staff members are, you should call the office and ask who is handling health policy or health legal work, or ask around among other advocates. If another advocate knows and has a good relationship with the staffer, ask them to introduce you. In addition to policy and legal staff, learn who handles health care issues in the governor's budget office. Keep in mind there may be several staffers in the office who have a hand in issues related to implementation of health reform, and make sure you're talking to all the relevant staff.

Departments or agencies

A number of state agencies are involved in health policy, and the structure will vary from state to state. Key departments usually include the Departments of Health, Human Services, Insurance, Treasury or Revenue. Because reform touches so many parts of state government, you'll want to develop relationships with officials at each of the relevant agencies. You may also want to strategize about which departments, by virtue of their mission or jurisdiction, are most likely to focus on promoting quality, affordable health care and concern for vulnerable populations. They may be an important voice for these issues when there are competing interests at the table.

Because of the complexity associated with implementing health reform, many states are focusing their efforts by designating a lead agency, appointing coordinating councils that bring together the different agencies with jurisdiction, and in some cases even creating a new agency to spearhead health reform implementation.

Important lessons in identifying key state officials:

- *Request a meeting.* You should write to the agency head asking for a meeting, and suggest that if he or she is not available you would be interested in meeting with the appropriate staff. When you meet, thank the official for their time and stress your interest in working with them.
- *Come prepared.* When you meet with the governor's office or an agency, be prepared to introduce yourself, your organization and your organization's priorities, and ask about the governor's or agency's priorities. Ask about their willingness to make an introduction to others in government for you to follow up. Do your research before the meeting to find out what motivates and influences the agency head or staff – know about their prior jobs and interests, and use any connections to build your credibility.
- *Don't overlook staff!* Most state agencies are headed by a political appointee chosen by the governor. You should try to develop a relationship with him or her, but you should also recognize that the career staff at the department often have tremendous knowledge and will play key roles in implementation. These individuals will remain at the departments in important positions regardless of who is governor, and they will provide continuity during implementation. On the important details, they are just as influential as elected or appointed officials. The chief actuary at the Department of Insurance, for example, is not a public figure but is someone who knows your state's insurance market better than just about anyone, and will be a key figure in implementing insurance reforms.
- *Monitor changes in key state positions.* When the governor fills a vacancy in appointed positions or lead staff, advocate for placement of someone friendly to consumers and vulnerable populations.

Press staff

Both the governor's office and relevant agencies have press or communications staff members who are also important contacts. You will want to work with them on press opportunities to highlight the impact of reform on real people and successful "firsts" (the first small business to get the tax credit, the first person at 133 percent of the federal poverty level to enroll in Medicaid, etc.).

Legislators

Many state legislatures are active in setting up the infrastructure to implement the national health reform law. They may be helpful in ensuring that consumer voices are part of the implementation process, either through legislation or oversight hearings. Even though most of the implementation work may be at the executive branch, don't neglect legislators who share and can help promote your interests. Legislators who are invested in the success of reform will be more likely to help when you run into roadblocks.

In addition to building relationship with elected officials, don't forget legislative staff. Legislatures have a variety of staff members who may be relevant to your advocacy: a legislator's personal staff; committee aides who may have particular expertise; and budget, policy and research staff. You'll want to identify and cultivate relationships with these staff – just like agency staff members, they have important knowledge and play key roles.

Here are some ways to work with legislators:

- *Build upon existing relationships.* Legislators have unique forums to hold state officials accountable for protecting consumer interests. For example, most agency heads testify before the state legislature to present their budgets. This is a forum during which legislators can ask questions about the administration's plans for health reform implementation.
- *Support legislators in their work.* Health care reform is an opportunity to develop new relationships with legislators. Offer to organize meetings with legislators and their constituents to help the legislator understand how health reform will affect their district. Research and see if a legislator has a particular interest, or an active constituency that will benefit from reform – children with special needs, for example – and focus on that issue. This will help make the legislator feel more invested in reform.
- *Use legislators.* When appropriate, use legislators with whom you have a relationship. For example, if an agency head or the governor's office is not responsive, when you write to them you may want to CC relevant legislators (chairs of the health or budget committees, majority and minority leader, etc.) so they are aware of developing issues. This may result in legislators following up with similar inquiries. You'll want to be careful and do this only when necessary, however.
- *Don't forget your federal officials.* Federal officials may also be useful in helping you reach out to state officials. Keep your Congressional delegation and their staff informed of your activities to promote consumer interests, and ask them to raise the issues when they meet or talk with state officials.

Best practices in developing and cultivating relationships with state officials

After you have identified with whom you should work and have made the necessary contacts, it is critical that you take the time and effort necessary to build and maintain those relationships. These contacts will be crucial to your work throughout the multi-year implementation process, and, in many cases, you will be beneficial to their work as well. The following steps don't take a lot of time or effort, and they will help to strengthen your ongoing relationships with state officials.

- *Become a trusted resource on health issues in your state.* An important way to cultivate relationships with key officials is to provide them with helpful information so they view you as a resource. When you meet with them, ask how you can help them do their job: Do they need examples of the impact of a certain provision? A contact with a person or family directly affected? (Often they will want “real people” for press events and may ask for your help in identifying appropriate people.) Contacts in another state? (For example, if your state and another state are facing a decision and are similarly situated, mention that you have contacts there and offer to do research on how that state is handling the issue.) If your organization has regional or county-by-county data, offer to provide it. If you have a specific “ask” of them (e.g. for the governor to file comments on a proposed rule), offer to provide them with a draft or even bring draft text with you.
- *Practice good communications skills.* Ask the official how they prefer to be contacted. If they welcome emails, send them email updates as appropriate – if you see a report they might find helpful, for example. Don't badger, but establish yourself as a resource. And always give them notice if your organization is going to be doing anything public that is in any way relevant to them – issuing a press release or report, testifying, publishing an op-ed, hosting an event, etc.
- *Stay in contact and be strategic.* Ask if you can set up regularly scheduled meetings to discuss developing issues. If you are working with other advocates, make sure to pre-meet before each meeting to go over your agenda and each advocate's roles, so the meeting is efficient and productive. Demonstrate that you recognize the demands on the official's time by canceling any regularly scheduled meeting during a slow time when there is no pressing business. When appropriate, include a range of constituencies – religious, business, labor, insurers, providers – to show that a broad range of populations are watching the issue.
- *Invite them to events.* Invite the governor's office staff or agency head to speak to your organization, so they can learn more about your organization. You may want to schedule a tour to demonstrate the best practices of a community organization. Ask if the official would like you to do a press release for local papers highlighting the visit. Be sure to include a “real person” who would be affected by reform.

- *Be patient.* Recognize that staffers have significant responsibilities and may be doing more work with less resources given the tough budgets most states are facing; don't be offended if they don't immediately respond to calls or emails. Gently follow up if emails are unanswered, but again, don't badger.
- *Be visible.* Determine what public forums the official might be participating in and attend. The Medicaid Director, for example, may hold monthly or quarterly meetings with stakeholders. Tell them in advance if you plan to attend – they will appreciate the courtesy, and you might be able to get five minutes with them before or after the meeting.
- *Be coordinated.* If you are working as part of a coalition, make sure you coordinate your contacts. Bombarding an official from different angles is counterproductive. You may want to assign advocates to different officials, so they can develop relationships over time, and make sure to update each other regularly to ensure coordination and prevent confusion.
- *Establish ground rules for your coalition.* In addition to coordinating contacts, it may also be helpful to establish ground rules with your coalition, such as: no side deals, and consensus as the default decision-making method. This will help officials to be confident the coalition representative they are talking to is working collaboratively with the larger coalition.
- *Promote accountability.* It's important to establish transparent accountability for the administration. Even the friendliest administration needs to be politely held accountable.
 - Establish public and transparent areas of accountability for reform, including a timeline, and share them with the administration. For example, “The consumer community will evaluate the quality of reform implementation by the following categories: a)... b)... c)... and we will publicly review this progress every quarter.”
 - Follow up on these clear areas of discussion with the administration, and couple them with press opportunities. For example: “We advocates think it is important a public hearing be held for the creation of ABC regulation, and we commit to turning out advocates and coordinating our support so the hearing is productive and gets good press.”
- *Write a thank you note.* Always write a follow up note to thank the staffer for his or her time (email is usually best) and to review the issues you discussed and any follow up. If the meeting was particularly productive, you may want to write to the governor (or appropriate agency head or legislator) to compliment the staffer.