

**HIV Community Health Care Reform Conference Call
June 18, 2009 Call Summary**

Note: since this conference call, the House of Representatives released a draft version of its health care reform bill. Details will be provided on the next community call.

Legislation Update:

Senator Kennedy's HELP Committee has released a draft of its bill and it is being marked up this week. There are some good things in the bill, e.g., increased Medicaid up to 150% of Federal Poverty Level for everyone. The bill focuses more on what insurance would look like since Medicaid isn't under the jurisdiction of the HELP Committee. The bill creates "state exchanges" that will certify private insurance plans that meet certain requirements.

The bill calls for new minimum mandatory requirements, including mental health, substance abuse, preventive services, lab work, pharmaceuticals, etc. There are provisions limiting cost-sharing and investments in workforce development.

There is a placeholder in the draft for public insurance option language, but currently no specifics in the bill. This does highlight the vulnerability of public option in the Senate. The bill is what we would expect and want from Senator Kennedy, particularly with its focus on underserved areas and addressing health disparities.

Senator Baucus' staff has indicated that the Senate Finance Committee's bill will be the major vehicle for health care reform and stress that the provisions must be paid for. The HELP Committee's bill was scored high (considered to be expensive); however, the scoring didn't look at savings down the line, nor did it consider the impact of a public option.

Senator Coburn has also released a bill. It eliminates some current Medicaid recipients, gives tax credits to purchase insurance, and does not include a public plan.

Political Landscape:

We need to continue to stress to House and Senate leadership that eliminating the disability requirement is a top priority, along with public option and Early Treatment for HIV Act (ETHA) language.

Timetable:

Congress will be on recess the week of June 29th for the July 4th holidays. From July 6th until the August recess, they will vote on House and Senate legislation.

Congress will be out most of August for recess. The House will be out from August 3- September 7 and the Senate from August 10- September 7. That is when we need to see what is in each bill and how we want to prioritize for the conference committee process (when the House and Senate review differences between the two versions and negotiate a final bill).

Finalizing health care reform legislation will be a top priority for Congress in September and October.

Getting Involved:

Now is the time for everyone to get involved and make our voices heard – especially to fight for Medicaid expansion, ETHA, and the public option. Action Alerts are being circulated and you can read them at www.taepusa.org. The July 4th recess and the August recess are good times to communicate with your elected officials when they are home and more accessible. See Tips for District Meetings (below) and look for future Alerts with more information.

Next Call:

The next community call will be Thursday, June 18th, at 2 pm Eastern, 11 am Pacific. Dial: 218-339-2699; Access Code: 968918#. This call will provide an overview of the House draft bill and other updates.

Resources:

Summaries of these calls, action alerts, and updates will be sent through the HIV Health Care Access Working Group listserv. If you are not already on that listserv (or have not previously sent a message to RSVP for the June 4 call or asking to be added to the listserv), email pdunn.projectinform@gmail.com and we will add you.

- Treatment Access Expansion Project (HIV Health Care Access Working Group legislation and proposal analyses and documents): www.taepusa.org
- Families USA (focus on reform to provide affordable health care for all): www.familiesusa.org



TIPS FOR AN EFFECTIVE DISTRICT MEETING

First things first—who are your reps?

If you don't know who your legislators are, you're not alone! You can identify your U.S. Senators and Representative at www.congress.org. Enter your zip code in the box on the upper right corner of the page. Click on each legislator's name to find their contact information.

Scheduling the meeting:

Once you determine who your legislators are, the next step is scheduling a meeting in their district office. The main thing to keep in mind is that it is important to be patient and persistent in order to make this meeting happen. Elected officials receive many requests for meetings, special events, and fundraisers so it may take a while before they can meet with you. The best time for scheduling a meeting with legislators is during their "recesses" (listed on the websites discussed earlier) and after the legislative year, usually October-December. Legislators are also often in their district offices on Fridays during the legislative session.

It is much easier -- and often more useful -- to schedule a meeting with an aide to the legislator. These staffers are the eyes and ears of the legislator. One of their jobs is to meet with advocates and constituents on behalf of the legislator to collect information and opinions about their needs and what they think about different pieces of legislation. It is very useful to establish relationships with these aides since they are far more accessible and often more knowledgeable about specific issues than the legislator. They meet on a regular basis with their boss to discuss the information they collected in these constituent meetings.

To schedule a local meeting, call the district office and ask to speak to the legislator's district scheduler. You might get voicemail or you might speak directly with the scheduler. Either way, let her/him know that you are a constituent and would like to schedule a meeting with the legislator or an appropriate staff person from the office. Explain briefly the issue that you would like to discuss. You may be asked to send an email or a written letter requesting the meeting. If you get voicemail, listen carefully to the outgoing message, as it often contains specific instructions on how to schedule a meeting.

It is important to be persistent, yet patient. You may have to call a couple of times, but try to give some time for the scheduler to get back to you. Most district offices are very accommodating of their constituents, but they are usually very busy so do not assume

that they don't want to schedule a meeting. The scheduler will probably try to schedule a meeting with a staffer instead of the legislator. Again, it is recommended that you meet with an aide, but you should also stress to the scheduler that you are a constituent and would like to meet at some point with your elected representative.

Who should attend?

Once the meeting is scheduled, you should start identifying who should attend. The scheduler will probably let you know how many people can attend, based on the size of their meeting rooms. A typical district meeting will be from 5-10 people. You will want to ensure that your group is diverse and reflects the district that the legislator represents.

It is particularly important to bring individuals who have a compelling story to tell about the issues you want to discuss. One of the most powerful ways to influence elected officials is to put human stories and faces on the issues and to let them know how their vote affects real people in their district. For example, if you are discussing the need for universal health care, invite someone who is uninsured to tell their representatives what it's like to live without health care coverage.

Materials:

You will also want to develop some written materials to bring to the meeting. This isn't mandatory, but will help establish your credibility as advocates and will give the legislator and staff information they can study after the meeting. You might want to put a packet together that includes some background information and your position on the issues you will discuss. The packet should also have information about any organizations that are represented at the meeting and the names and contact information of participants. It is also very effective to bring letters of support from constituents who aren't able to attend the meeting but support your agenda.

The Pre-Meeting:

It is extremely important that your group meets in advance to plan the meeting. It's best for this to occur a few days before the meeting, but could also be an hour before. This will allow everyone to get to know each other, if they don't already. At this pre-meeting, you should identify someone who will facilitate the district meeting. The facilitator's role is to make sure that everyone who wants to speak has an opportunity to and ensures that all of the issues are discussed. You will also want to determine the meeting's agenda at the pre-meeting and identify who will speak on what issues.

The pre-meeting is also a good opportunity for experienced advocates to give tips to beginners. Many people who have never met with legislators are very nervous and will have a lot of questions. If you have enough time, you might want to try some role playing with someone acting as a legislator. This allows participants to practice telling their stories in a more comfortable environment.

The District Meeting:

Once your group has met in advance and you have your written materials, you are ready for a successful legislative meeting. This meeting will probably be about half an hour, depending on the legislator or aide's schedule. Here are some tips for an effective meeting:

- **Begin with introductions.** Mention if you are a resident or work in their district. Legislators are more likely to respond to the needs of constituents than to non-constituent advocates.
- **Be courteous.** You want to develop a relationship with this legislator. Don't burn bridges. It is very rare for a legislator or staffmember to be hostile, but if that happens, just say thank you and leave.
- **Be focused in your discussion.** Stick to your agreed upon agenda; don't let the legislator throw you off track. The facilitator should always politely bring the discussion back to the topic at hand. If necessary, have a written agenda on hand to keep you focused.
- **Remember that personal stories are the most compelling advocacy tool that you have.**
- **You are the expert!** Speak with confidence. You have firsthand experience with the issues you want to discuss, so let them know.
- **Ask if the legislator has specific questions about your issues or wants additional information.** Keep a list of what the office wants and get back to them! Remember that you're establishing a relationship, so make sure you follow up with any of your commitments.
- **What if you are asked a question and you don't know the answer?** It's okay to say "I don't know". But make sure that you offer to find out the answer and will get back to them. Never make up anything.
- **Work as a team.** Designate a timekeeper so you can discuss all the issues on the agenda. Make sure everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity.
- **Get verbal commitments from your legislator.** Ask them to commit on the issues you discuss. Ask them for their vote on specific budget items, bills and/or policies.
- **Be sure to provide your legislator or staff member with their information packet.** This packet should contain information about your issues and requests. Refer to materials provided in the packet throughout the visit.
- **Leave business cards or, if you have them, personal cards.**
- **Thank them for the meeting.**

What to expect from the legislator or aide:

Regardless of the legislator's political affiliation or position on your issues, it is very rare that s/he will be rude or hostile. They want to have a pleasant and productive meeting just like you. Here are the three most common meetings and how you should handle them.

Pleasantly non-committal:

This is the most common legislative meeting. The legislator or the aide will be pleasant, but won't make commitments and in many cases won't even write down a lot of notes or ask a lot of questions. You will need to work a bit to get them more involved by asking them if they have specific questions or need additional information. You may need to reiterate your points a couple of times and ask if you can follow up with them to determine their positions.

Preaching to the choir:

These are meetings with legislators who support your issues. They are friendly and usually knowledgeable about your issues. The best way to make these meetings productive is to get their commitments and to ask them to take a leadership role by contacting their colleagues on the issues or sponsoring a bill. Be sure you thank them for their support.

The Nay-sayers:

There are some legislators who simply will not agree with your positions. They will usually not be rude, but might come across as inconsiderate and dismissive of the needs of those impacted by their actions. It is still very useful to meet with these elected officials since establishing a relationship could help sway their opinion on at least one of your key issues. Make sure that you still get through your agenda and make your key points. Always ask them if there's anything they need that might change their mind.

After the meeting:

Immediately after the meeting, meet as a group to debrief. Make sure you are out of earshot from the office! Review notes, comments, and necessary follow-up information. If the legislator or aide requested extra information make certain a representative from your group follows up!

You will also want to identify someone to write a thank you letter from the group. Send this letter to the legislator and/or their staff within one week of the meeting. This letter should also outline your understanding of any commitments made by the legislator and summarize key points. It also wouldn't hurt for everyone in the group to write a brief thank you note.

Finally:

Remember that this meeting is the first step in establishing an ongoing relationship with your legislator's district office. Make sure that you continue to write, call, and meet with these individuals as issues come up.

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