

Influencing Public Policy Meeting Your Legislative Representatives

Parents who have children with disabilities and/or special health care needs often have to interface with complex systems to get the care their child needs to be a healthy, happy and productive citizen. Many of us never thought very much about our government and how it works. We just knew that the roads eventually got paved, the water came out of the tap and that people in our community who needed help weren't just left out in the cold to fend for themselves. So when suddenly we are the families that need the assistance, we become hurt and angry when we find out that the supports we thought were there to support children and families in need sometimes aren't really there or are so hard to access that they might as well not exist. That's when ***we become advocates for our children and by necessity for all children with disabilities and/or special health care needs.***

“Get involved in politics as if your life depended on it – because it does!” - Justin Dart

Parents need tools to do their advocacy work. So, Parent to Parent of Colorado has developed this ***tool kit*** to help you get started on the road to influencing public policy.

WHO: There are many people in your community that have the power and influence to change your child's life for the better:

- State Representatives to the Legislature
- State Senators in the Legislature
- Federal Representatives to Congress
- Federal Senators in Congress
- President of the United States
- County Commissioners
- Candidates for elected office
- School Board Members
- The Governor of Colorado

Many of these people have very little experience with people with disabilities or special health care needs. They have personal experience driving the roads and turning on the tap, but they don't know what it is like to live with bi-polar disorder, autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, epilepsy or ADHD. Very often however, these folks want to understand and really are there to serve the people they represent. ***It is our job to introduce them to our kids and our family so they can learn.***

WHAT: Politicians spend a good deal of time talking with their constituents. They do this at:

- political meetings
- public forums
- picnics
- by email
- lectures
- by phone
- by visiting with people in their homes and communities

Our job is to invite them to share a slice of our lives, so that they can understand our struggles and our victories. Once they have a relationship with us, they won't be able to forget that we exist. ***Check websites of political parties and calendars on local newspaper websites for events where you can connect with your representatives.***

WHEN: There are many opportunities to visit with politicians and public servants. ***Watch for announcements*** in:

- Local Newspapers
- Local TV News broadcasts

- Websites
- Parent to Parent listserv

- Email Trees

State Senators and Representatives are very busy during the legislative session (January – May). Many of them will take the time to meet with you then, but usually their bills have been written and they are working on existing policy. ***The time to meet with your state legislators is during the summer and early fall.*** This is the time when they are looking for issues to bring to the legislature in the coming year.

Federal legislators work most of the year in Washington DC, but come back to Colorado during scheduled breaks. Usually over holidays – Memorial Day, Independence Day, New Years, Labor Day and sometime around Easter. This is when they will have public forums and you can schedule a time to meet with them. Email, phone, fax and letters work all of the time.

WHERE: Go to wherever they are and invite them to your home and community

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| -your home | -their offices |
| -recreation centers | -at the capitol |
| -congregations of any religious order | -public forums |
| -public parks | -political party events |

WHY: Like it or not, our sons and daughters with disabilities and special health care needs have an extraordinary need for supports and services. Even though various religious and community groups do help a little, the most support that your son or daughter and your family will get to assist with the disability or special health care need will be through publicly funded organizations or government. ***If elected officials don't know who we are, what we need, and what we can contribute, they will forget that we exist.***

HOW: There are many resources on the web including [Making Your Case](#). Children's Hospital offers [Advocacy Training](#). Watch the P2P listserv for other trainings.

CAN I DO THIS ALONE? Many parents connect with their elected officials on their own and are extremely effective. Just as many, however, get together with other parents in their neighborhood, support group or other association and work together. If you would like support to make your voice known to the decision- makers who impact your child's life, contact Parent to Parent at 1-877-472-7201. ***P2P can match you with a board member or veteran parent who might be able to offer some needed support.***

Let us never forget that government is ourselves and not an alien power over us. The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a president and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country. - Franklin D. Roosevelt

Developed by Parent to Parent of Colorado (p2p-co.org)
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