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Building a Successful Relationship with your Elected Officials

Building relationships with lawmakers and their staff often appears intimidating, confusing and – worst of all – a waste of time. However, ABH's experience shows that developing relationships with your elected official is a vital part of the advocacy process. We rely on our members during important times in the legislative process to reach out directly to State Senators and Representatives on important legislative and budget details. It's important though to develop these relationships before they are needed.

Here are five, basic strategies you can take to get to know your legislators better.

1. **Learn About Your Legislator** - The rules of relationship building haven't changed since Dale Carnegie wrote *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. One of Carnegie's rules is to learn about who you're trying to influence. What committees does the legislator sit on? What legislation did he introduce? Where did she go to college? Any information that builds a connection to you or community behavioral health is valuable.
2. **Become a Reliable Expert and Contact**- All elected officials rely on individuals with unique knowledge about how issues affect communities. They also rely on those who can help them with constituent requests. Making yourself available to elected officials and their staff helps build a relationship of mutual respect and interest.
3. **Communicate Frequently** - This doesn't mean calling every day – it means building a rapport through persistently and politely communicating with your elected officials. Members and staff remember the individuals who are frequently in contact with their office not only to ask for help but to share information, say thank you, or offer assistance.
4. **Have a Specific Ask** - All successful advocacy efforts have some level of metrics – a measure of accountability the lawmaker is held to. It can be cosponsoring a bill, sending a letter or agreeing to attend an event. Many individuals and groups fail this test and send generic messages to “support behavioral health.” Or, “implement parity.” This will result in frustration for the staff member who drafts the response and no clear way for you to determine whether the legislator supports your position.
5. **Tell a Personal Story** - It's hard to underestimate the power of a personal story. It can put a human face on an issue that no statistic or data point can do. Your story doesn't have to be a tragedy – but it does need to speak in real-life terms how a law could affect your organization or the individuals you serve.

*Document adopted from Congressional Management Foundation (www.congressfoundation.org)