

Advocacy Best Practices and Innovations in the Era of COVID-19

Notes from the District Policy Group 2020 Client Summit

Following the resounding success of the District Policy Group's 2020 Client Summit, we are pleased to share with you tips from the client panel discussion on best practices for advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.



A Virtual Day on the Hill Drives Real Results

This nonprofit association, dedicated to promoting the rights and well-being of individuals with a specific medical condition, has held two face-to-face Hill day events in previous years, each with 100 to 150 participants. As the 2020 event approached, they scrambled to adopt to COVID-19 pandemic circumstances, and staff worked with meeting planners to make a virtual day on the Hill happen.

Despite some glitches in planning and logistics, the evaluation done after the event indicated that 100% of participants would recommend a similar event to others. More than 300 people registered from 44 states and the District of Columbia and about 150 people attended the training. 145 advocates opted to participate in the "contact your member" component of the Hill Day. These 145 advocates came from 40 different states. Participants were encouraged to contact their Members of Congress via the association's advocacy platform, and there were 1,900 emails, tweets, videos or phone calls to members of Congress between April 27 and May 1, 2020. They are using a committee to plan the 2021 event, and hope to encourage volunteer leaders to be the voice and face of the day.

Key Takeaways

- Pre-record some training sessions and ask speakers to monitor Q&A in real time.
- Ask all speakers to run through their presentations to ensure they are comfortable with the webinar platform.
- Break up the training so people don't have to sit for hours at their computers.
- Talk with your third-party vendors about a game plan if something untoward, such as a power outage, occurs.
- Be prepared to "punt" and adjust as needed if your plans go awry.
- Make sure all parties have everyone's contact information.
- Put time in the schedule for small group/state-specific training.
- Let your community help you plan; they might see challenges that you won't.



Network of Experts Supports Virtual Congressional Briefing

On July 24, 2020, an organization that tackles some of the biggest challenges facing education and the economy hosted its first virtual congressional briefing on virtual high school internships to help their advocacy work and educate stakeholders. In pre-pandemic times they would have brought in local DC academics and stakeholders from the surrounding area. For this virtual briefing they were able to tap into an entire national network of practicing subject-matter experts.

Key Takeways

- Without disturbing schedules or incurring the expense of travel, they gathered a dynamic panel including a career technical education executive for a large public school district; the Director of the VA Voluntary Service; an innovation executive at a large financial services company; and public school students.
- All of the panelists spoke in real time about their experiences; for instance, the public school district was sourcing a hybrid model of internships for more than 3,000 students, and one of their students spoke to her Zoom life schedule.
- During the Q&A, panelists were able to hear from both sides of the aisle; they took those perspectives home and are now including them in strategy plans.
- Rather than separate briefings for the House and Senate, they held a briefing that informed not only individuals from both chambers but also other stakeholders.
- The session was recorded and sent with a thank-you note to those who attended, and a link was provided to those who were not able to attend – expanding their audience and reach.
- Their standing advocacy toolbox will always include in-person relationship building, and now has a virtual component. It is imperative to use all tools to advocate for the students and give them the opportunity to rise above the poverty line.



A Future for Hybrid Events

An association for nurses originally postponed its National Symposium when the pandemic hit, then realized it would need to pivot to a virtual event. It was fortunate to avoid hotel penalty charges by booking at the same venue for 2023. Planning required the full effort of the association's National Office Staff and Conferences Committee. A preexisting contract with an Internet Broadcasting Company meant no RFPs were required to find a provider to deliver this virtual event. Attendance was very strong and feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

Key Takeways

- The virtual event was a combination of general and concurrent sessions with an exhibit hall and corporate sponsored sessions.
- Pricing packages were created to provide flexibility in purchasing for attendees.
- A concierge approach was provided for each speaker prior to their live sessions using a virtual "green room" where slides and technology were tested. Each session had an assigned moderator.
- Closed captioning was provided.
- They knew engaging the attendees was the key to a successful virtual event. Engagement occurred through a Chat Box during each session; a Leaderboard that awarded points and high-value prizes encouraged engagement; and Forums that allowed attendees to chat and post messages outside of sessions. There were more than 15,000 unique chat comments over the three-day event.
- The only negative feedback received was that the Chat Box during sessions was distracting. At all future virtual events, this Chat Box will offer the option to be minimized on each attendee's screen.
- This virtual event resulted in a profit, as overhead was low due to minimal production and travel expenses.
- The organization is budgeting to hold future hybrid events. Several attendees noted that typical circumstances outside of a pandemic (such as work schedules, cost and home responsibilities) would have prevented them from attending an in-person meeting, while a virtual event allowed them to attend, and they hoped such hybrid events will continue after the pandemic ends.



A Changed Dynamic Helps Clarify the Issues

When a senior-living company entered into the congressional/government relations policy arena, it had an internal policy workgroup and was an active member of several national associations that represent senior living communities and nursing care. The company relied on them to identify issues at the state and federal level that may impact senior living communities, and prior to COVID-19, that generally focused on such areas as standard of care, reimbursement, real estate, insurance and similar concerns.

In February 2020, the dynamic changed – to say the least. The company realized its voice was needed in a very direct and urgent way to help federal legislators and the administration understand the role, needs and challenges senior living communities faced – and continue to face – as the pandemic escalated. They began working with DPG in March, which helped coordinate their message with national associations, but the story was their own, with a significant footprint in 32 states. Meetings were held via phone calls over the course of more than six months with more than 60 Members of Congress and/or their staffs. It became clear that if there is a timely and relevant issue that Members of Congress and their staffs are ready to jump on the phone or video and access was not an issue.

After the first round of calls, it became abundantly clear that congressional staff were conflating nursing homes with senior living communities. The issue was driven home when two Members of Congress urged the company to continue to make the distinction between senior living and nursing homes because, they said, not many Members of Congress understand that difference. They had work to do! Issues and needs were getting lost in many offices because skilled nursing was being addressed through the HHS Emergency Provider Fund but senior living communities were not.

Key Takeaways

- **Consistency:** They outlined a consistent series of key messages and requests to discuss with Members of Congress and staff related to keeping seniors safe and cared for while seeking emergency funding, PPE and liability protections.
- **Flexibility:** Upon receiving feedback, they modified talking points to spend the first part of each meeting talking about the distinction between skilled nursing and senior living.
- **Graphics:** Sometimes pictures are louder than words. They worked with DPG to develop a graphic of the components of senior living communities, which they began to share with Hill offices.
- **Follow-up:** Sent follow-up thank-you notes to each office contacted to reiterate the differences and restate the needs and requests discussed.



As the pandemic continues and spikes occur in many areas, challenges are not going away and financial burdens continue to escalate. The new Congress will provide ample opportunities to continue to educate and advocate on behalf of seniors and the communities where they live.



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