

VCA Grassroots Primer

Legislators vote on thousands of issues during each session of the General Assembly. They count on their constituents and lobbyists to provide the information they need to make an informed decision on which position to take. Your role is to provide them with the information they need to make decisions that agree with the VCA position. Here are some general rules to follow as you do that:

- **Be prepared.** Know your topic. It's likely that you will know more about the topic than the legislator, especially if the issue is one that VCA is promoting.
- **Make an appointment.** The best time to visit with legislators is in their home districts at any time NOT during the legislative session. Whether in the home district or at the Capitol, make an appointment. During the session, even if you have made an appointment, you may meet with his/her legislative aide. Not to worry: aides know their legislators well and can usually get the ear of the members.
- **Aides and legislators are extremely busy.** Plan to talk for five minutes or less.
- **Stick to the issue.** Tell which bill(s) you are supporting or opposing. Explain your reasons for your support or opposition.
- **Present both sides of the issue, but explain why the VCA position is better public policy and why the opponents' arguments are flawed.** Try not to criticize your opponents; just indicate why you believe their position is misguided or based on incorrect information.
- **Answer any questions the aide or legislator might have.** If you don't know the answer, say so, and promise to get back with them with the answer. Or tell them that you'll consult with the advocacy consultant who will follow up with answers, and follow through on that. Therefore, the next statement is obvious:
- **Be honest.** Don't fudge the truth. Your future credibility with a legislator, as well as the credibility of VCA, depends on honest and accurate information. You can be sure that if you intentionally or unintentionally mislead a legislator, the legislator will find out. This creates a very great risk that the legislator will not believe anything else that you or VCA asserts.
- **Talk about good public policy, about what's best for people we serve.**
- **If possible, give an example or anecdote to illustrate your point.** Often, stories are more powerful than statistics or facts. But, try to avoid using examples that may raise more questions than they address. That is, make sure the example specifically addresses the issue at hand.
- **If your legislator doesn't agree with your position, pleasantly agree to disagree.** You might ask if there is any information you could provide that would change his or her mind. Do not get angry, frustrated, or threaten the legislator in any way (i.e. "I won't vote for you."). There will be a time in the future where you want the legislator to agree with you on another issue, and if you have burned your bridges, you may lose any future opportunity.
- **Listen carefully to the legislator's statement of his position on this issue.** Some legislators are masters at sounding like they agree with you when, in fact, that is not what they have said. Do not construe general statements (i.e. "I've always watched what VCA does") to be support for your position. The only way to know the legislator's position is to ask directly (i.e. "Will you vote for (or against) this bill?") and then listen carefully to the answer. Many legislators will defer until they "see the language of the bill" or "hear from the other side." Let them know you will keep in touch and look forward to working with them in their home districts.