



**Strengthening Oklahoma's Safety Net,  
One Community At A Time**

## **Board Bulletin**

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### **Contacting Legislators and Building Relationships**

The last issue focused on the importance of grassroots advocacy and the role board members play to further CHC causes. While advocacy requires continual effort throughout the year, the next few months are certainly crucial to grassroots advocacy efforts. On February 6, the 50th Oklahoma Legislature will convene its second session. OPCA will host its annual **Legislative Breakfast**, Thursday, **February 16** in **Room 511-A** of the **State Capitol** from **7:30 - 8:45 a.m.** In late March, health center advocates will be making "Hill Visits" in conjunction with the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) Policy and Issues Forum in Washington, D.C. Both events require that advocates know the protocol associated with legislative visits. The following guidelines apply to visits and should also be used when contacting legislators.

#### ***Proper Protocol***

- ◆ **Have a Game Plan** - Before making legislative visits, develop strategies that address: 1) specific issues to be discussed, 2) time and location as agreed upon by the legislator's office, 3) appropriate meeting attendees and designated spokesperson, and 4) review visit protocol.
- ◆ **Study the Person** - Biographies are available on both state and federal legislators that explain their backgrounds, committees on which they serve, voting record, etc. Do your homework prior to the meeting.
- ◆ **Dress appropriately** - Wear appropriate and professional attire but be ready for a full day of walking by wearing comfortable shoes - particularly when visiting federal legislators who are in different buildings on opposite sides of the Capitol. This reduces fatigue and allows clearer thinking for effective advocacy.
- ◆ **Be respectful of time** - Be punctual and adhere to the allotted time agreed upon when arranging the meeting. Do not drag out visits. Stick to the issues, distribute information and leave with a thank you.
- ◆ **Representative vs. Congressman** - It is important to know the proper salutations for legislators. Mr. Smith, as a member of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, should be addressed as State Representative Smith. If a U.S. House of Representatives member, he would be Congressman Smith. If Ms. Jones were a member of the State Senate, she would be State Senator Jones. It would be Senator Jones if she were a member of the U.S. Senate. When writing letters, the addressee should be The Honorable (Full Name) with the respective legislative body listed. By using proper protocol, you demonstrate respect for the position.
- ◆ **Be yourself** - Legislators appreciate genuine commitment from their constituents. While it is important to be knowledgeable and establish credibility, focus on the issues and refrain from overtly trying to impress.
- ◆ **Stay in control** - Be cordial and professional but do not lose control of the conversation. Some legislators and aides will use 'red herrings' to steer away from the controversial discussions regarding issues. Small talk (e.g., favorite college teams) should be kept in check so that real issues can be discussed.
- ◆ **Be honest** - If you do not know the answer, tell the legislator that you will do the research and share the results. Then follow up with timely, accurate information. Integrity and credibility are key to developing long-lasting relationships with legislators and their aides. Legislators appreciate dependable information sources.
- ◆ **Know the opposition** - While it's obvious you should know who supports your issues, you should also know who doesn't and for what reasons. Legislators will ask why they should support your cause instead of the opposition. Again, credibility is key to a successful visit.
- ◆ **Persistent but pleasant** - Keep on task and strategically pursue the issues. If the messenger is obnoxious, the message will likely be unheard and definitely unattended.
- ◆ **Leave on good terms** - Sometimes you have to agree to disagree when dealing with legislators because of deep-seated philosophical differences. Working relationships can be maintained but it takes great effort. Leave the visit graciously knowing that you will most likely have to make future requests - keep the door open.

To review OPCA's entire *Board Bulletin* series, visit the 'CHC Boards' section of [www.okpca.org](http://www.okpca.org).

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