Uniting With Might

This article is from our AIDSWatch 2009 primer, which also includes:

Go Tell It On the Mountain: Let's speak our truth together—and rewrite HIV history—at AIDSWatch 2009.

The Holy Grail: What we're asking for on the Hill

Dear Congress: A letter to your representatives in Congress

Bearing Witness: AIDS advocates share their lobbying stories

The Glory and the Power: Who's who in HIV/AIDS on the Hill

April 1, 2009 By Kali Lindsey , Robert Greenwald and Matt Lesieur

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To successfully build greater Congressional support for our legislative and appropriations priorities, it is very important that everyone work together and communicate the same overall AIDSWatch message. In order for us to do that, we recommend that all AIDSWatch participants take the following steps:

1. Attend the AIDSWatch training Your ability to attend the AIDSWatch training is very important to ensure that everyone is on message when we go to Capitol Hill to meet with members of Congress and their staff. We must all speak with one voice and be able to articulate the same message everywhere we go. Whether you have been to AIDSWatch many times before or are brand new to AIDSWatch, you will benefit from this training. This is your opportunity to build a rapport with your fellow colleagues, practice talking about our issues, and develop your strategy for your meeting with your representatives. If you are an "old timer" at AIDSWatch, we really need you at the training to help out your fellow colleagues! If you are new, this training will be critical!

Before your visit, learn as much as you can about the legislators you are going to meet; if you are able to, practice what you will say to your elected officials before arriving at the training. It will help you be more effective when carrying our message to the Hill. Specifically, try to find out about your senators' or representatives' committee assignments, how they voted in the past, and what they are supporting in the 111th Congress. Don't worry if you don't know how to find this information or don't have time to do the research. There will be many individuals and organizations at AIDSWatch that will lend a hand in helping you be as prepared for your Hill visit as possible.

2. Develop a meeting strategy with others from your state or congressional district At AIDSWatch, we conduct Hill visits with groups of people from the same state. To make these meetings as effective as possible, it is often helpful to designate a facilitator before the meeting. The facilitator will open the meeting with group introductions, present the overall purpose of the visit and keep the meeting on track. It is critical to prepare a clear and concise message before you walk into the meeting with your legislators and/or their health staff members. At AIDSWatch, you should meet with your group in a designated area before your Hill visit to review the strategy and talking points so everyone will stay on message. Congressional offices are formal; business casual attire at a minimum is highly encouraged. Be punctual and avoid eating or drinking in congressional offices. Silence or shut off cellular phones before the meeting starts.

As representatives who are accountable to a constituency, members of Congress and their staffs will be interested to hear what people from their states or districts have to say. Your group's introduction should include your names, where you are from and whom you represent. The facilitator should be comfortable talking about the AIDSWatch recommendations and making sure everyone has an opportunity to be heard. The facilitator can also make sure to request the lawmaker's support after each priority is discussed. The person acting as facilitator can change from meeting to meeting.

3. Remember that AIDsWatch is only the beginning A congressional visit during AIDSWatch is not just about asking for help—it is an opportunity to educate members on our issues. It is also an opportunity to build strong strategic relationships. We always want to thank our members of Congress for their leadership and support for our concerns in the past and ask for the same or more as needed. Immediately send a thank you letter to each person you meet. Be sure to document verbal commitments in the thank you letter and follow through on any promises. Reiterate your willingness to be of assistance and serve as a resource for your representative, both in Washington, DC, and at home.

AIDSWatch is our chance to turn hope into effective strategy that will save lives. See you on the Hill!

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