Engaging Elected Officials
Adrian Forsythe

• I am 35 years old and from Prince George’s County, Maryland

• I founded Empathy321 which supports the development of self-advocacy skills and empowerment and promotes full community inclusion for people with Down syndrome.

• I am employed by the University of Maryland as a Peer Advocacy Specialist in the TerpsEXCEED program. In addition, I am a National Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition (NDAC) member.

• I graduated from the George Mason University LIFE Program with concentrations in theater and communications.
Chapman Bryant II

- Policy and Advocacy Associate with the National Down Syndrome Congress
- Policy Areas: Social Security and healthcare
- Previously interned in the U.S. House of Representatives and worked in the U.S. Senate for Senator Roger F. Wicker (R-MS) handling healthcare policy
- Anna Brooke Bryant – sister with Down syndrome
Effectively Engaging Elected Officials 101

- What is Advocacy?
- Where do you start?
- Staying Informed
- Take Action
- Engage on Social Media
- Tell Your Story
- The Power of Self-Advocates
- Staff Relationships
- Partnerships and Follow-up
What is Advocacy?

• Dictionary: the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal

• Grassroots advocacy: collective action at the local level by individuals (“ordinary citizens”) to effect change

• Telling your personal story to try to turn “what is” into “what should be”; putting a real face on the issues

• Providing education and information to elected officials and the broader community about issues, problems, and concerns

• Is it the same as lobbying? NO. But lobbying can be a part of advocacy efforts

• Continuum of advocacy activities depending on comfort level, time, and passion for the issue.

• Who is an advocate? YOU ARE!
Be Informed. Stay Informed.

• Check out disability policy-related websites for information such as:
  ○ policy statements (healthcare, labor, etc)
  ○ issue briefs (find the list on the NDSC website)
  ○ Webinars (live or archived)

• E-newsletters from various disability organizations such as:
  ○ National Down Syndrome Congress (NDSC)
  ○ Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD)
  ○ The Arc – federal & state
  ○ Global Down Syndrome Foundation (GLOBAL)
  ○ National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)
  ○ National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS)

• Sign up for NDSC Action Alerts https://www.ndsccenter.org/political-advocacy/take-action-stay-informed/) and alerts from other organizations
Be Informed. Stay Informed.

• Participate in training opportunities such as:
  o Advocacy Training Boot Camp
  o Disability Policy Seminars
  o Down Syndrome Advocacy Conference (D.C.)
  o Partners in Policymaking
  o Your state likely has opportunities through other disability organizations. Jawanda will share this in a later presentation.
• “Like” and “Follow” NDSC and other disability policy organizations on social media
• News sources
  o Disability Scoop
  o The Hill
  o Politico
  o Major Newspapers (NYT, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post)
Where do you start?

Finding and Contacting Elected Officials

• How to contact elected officials (comprehensive) https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials
• U.S. House of Representatives https://www.house.gov/
  • U.S. Senate https://www.senate.gov/
  • https://www.commoncause.org/find-your-representative/addr/

Tracking Federal Bills (sign up for alerts)

• https://www.congress.gov/
• https://www.govtrack.us/

State Legislature and bills

• https://legiscan.com/
Take Action: Call and Call Again

• Elected officials want to hear from constituents
• No need to be an expert (calls take 2-3 minutes each)
• Staff keep tallies of total calls for & against a certain issue
• Use script from Action Alerts and add a personal touch
• Watch for “Call-In Days” – need critical mass of calls on a particular issue
Take Action: Send an Email

- Adapt script from Action Alert and add personal touches
- Email is more effective once relationship is established
- Email communication will probably be with staff
- Consider attaching a one-pager, links or pictures, but not too much
Engage on Social Media

• Use real-life relationships to build relationships on social media

• “Like”, “Follow” & “Friend”, & Tag your elected officials so that you can interact with them

• Most communication staffers manage their member's social media accounts

• Twitter is the most common way to interact with staff and urge them to act – use @handles and #hashtags

• #Downsyndrome is the most used hashtag in our community

• Be careful what you say: Social Media is forever
Tell Your Story

• Your most powerful tool is your story!
• A one-page leave-behind can be used in many situations - Melissa will talk about this in a later presentation

Include:
• Contact information including street address, state, zip code (constituents have power), phone, email, Twitter handle, etc.
• Photo – action or otherwise
• A few sentences about yourself (where you work, go to school, your interests)
• The issue you are addressing and why you are asking
• Thank you
Power of Self-Advocates

• Self-advocates are THE MOST EFFECTIVE advocates

• Engage them in all aspects of advocacy
  - Can bring one-pager about themselves to meetings
  - Effective on social media
  - Provide necessary tools and trainings so they can meaningfully participate
  - Public speaking workshops
  - Participation in advocacy trainings, conferences, Hill Days
Staff Relationships

- Make efforts to get to know the staff
- Visit staff in person at the local office and DC office, if possible
- Invite them to events or to visit your school or non-profits
- Staffers may move to other offices, but your relationship may remain intact
- Coffees with staffers
- Attend functions such as receptions
- Welcome staff into your home (if possible - friendly conversation)
- RESPECT
Important Notes from Staffers

• If possible, always start the meeting by thanking them for past support on issues. People come in always wanting things, and it’s great when constituents acknowledge past votes or leadership.

• Recommend coming in with just one or two main asks – include a letter or leave it behind and ask them to sign on to a bill.

• Recommend a thank you note to the Member and/or staff – an email or handwritten. It’s appreciated and makes a difference.

• Follow up with the staffer with requested materials, thank you notes, and additional development of the legislation (hearings, statements, or state-specific endorsements)

• Always be respectful and courteous to staffers - patience is key on busy days. The staffers will appreciate a warm smile and a courteous meeting.
Partnerships and Follow-up

- **Partnerships**
  - Look for organizations and/or people with similar issues
  - This doesn’t mean you have to agree on all topics
- **Online groups and state coalitions**
  - Statewide Down syndrome or multi-organization coalitions
  - Facebook advocacy groups - if your state doesn't have one, consider starting one.
- **Don’t stay in the Down syndrome bubble**
- **Follow-up**
  - With thank you
  - With the information you promised
  - With others who may have the information you need
  - As you come across applicable stories, send them along
- **Do not overdo it - pick your battles**
Thank You

- Say thank you when you:
  - Call
  - Email/write
  - Visit in person

- Say thank you again:
  - On social media – all kinds

- Say thank you:
  - Even when they do not do what you want
Advocacy Reminders

• Respect – always keep conversations and public discussions respectful, even if you disagree
  ○ “no permanent friends, no permanent enemies”

• Recognition – elected officials like to be publicly thanked, and recognized on social media and in newsletters

• Realize the power of staff – staff can be even more important than the elected officials themselves