

Why PACs Are an Essential Part of Advocacy

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Advocacy is a broad term which encompasses a range of activities, from direct advocacy of patients, their parents and their community, to population-based federal and state legislative advocacy through statutory policy and program changes.¹ It has been suggested “that advocacy occurs on a spectrum that includes legislative, administrative, clinical and patient-centered endeavors.”² As child and adolescent psychiatrists, we are well suited to be advocates for children’s mental health at all of these levels, because we are “immersed in the communities directly affected by these policies and can more quickly synthesize personal experience and scientific research to inform the debate.”¹ The American Medical Association declaration of professional responsibility states that physicians commit ourselves to, “advocate for social, economic, educational, and political changes that ameliorate suffering and contribute to human well-being.”³ In order to be effective advocates for our patients and our profession there are multiple ways to get involved, for example direct lobbying from AACAP’s Government Affairs Department, grassroots lobbying by our members individually or in coordination with the Association, and AACAP-PAC contributions by our Association members. In this article we will be focusing on Political Action Committees’ (PACs) basis for advocacy and education, and more specifically the AACAP-PAC.

What PACs Do, and Don’t Do

PACs, which were created through campaign finance reform laws, collect campaign contributions from their members and donate these funds to campaigns. At the Federal level, these contributions allow for direct contact with Members of Congress and candidates for national office to educate them through fundraisers and “meet and greet” gatherings that individual AACAP members would not be able to participate in as frequently otherwise. Voluntary contributions from Association members are made so that Members of Congress or worthy chal-

lengers can win campaigns. This is not a mechanism for allegedly “buying votes,” which would never be appropriate nor permissible. Instead, it is a legal, transparent, and necessary part of educating lawmakers, present and future. It is a protected first amendment right to contribute to any political cause or candidate, within established legal limits.

PACs have limited funds and must be selective in which campaigns they contribute. PACs have historically invested in campaigns of candidates who are proven effective legislators.⁴ In their paper on the topic, Box-Steffensmeier and Grant sought to determine if PAC contributions during the 103rd and 104th Congress were related to a member’s legislative effectiveness which they defined as their “hit rate,” the percentage of bills a member sponsors that becomes law.⁴ They confirmed that contributions were statistically higher for more effective members of Congress.

What AACAP-PAC Does

The mission of AACAP-PAC is to “educate, support, and elect candidates for Congress who advocate for child and adolescent psychiatry and child mental health.”⁵ By supporting Members of Congress and congressional candidates who are champions of children’s mental health, it is our vision that “child and adolescent psychiatry will have strong relationships with legislators, so that Congress acts to improve child mental health.”⁵ Our AACAP-PAC helps to identify and elect candidates to Federal office who support child and adolescent psychiatry and are pro-children’s mental health.⁵

AACAP-PAC has a board of directors made up of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists (CAP), and a CAP Fellow board member, appointed by our AACAP President, who work to ensure compliance with the legal requirements of the PAC and discuss and decide where funds should be distributed. As volunteer members of the AACAP-PAC Board of Directors, we help to evaluate

candidates we are considering for support and also make final approvals for all contributions. Currently, the power and presence of AACAP-PAC is opening doors as never before, as Members of Congress and other candidates reach out to talk by zoom through daily “meet and greets.” We cannot ignore the important role politics plays in Washington that affects children’s mental health policy, and it is our ethical duty to promote change that will positively impact the health of populations. In fact, through AACAP-PAC we are members of the Medical and Dental PAC group (MaDPAC), which allows our lobbyists to regularly meet with other national medical specialty lobbyists and candidates who share common goals. This literally creates more visibility in extended conversations with legislator candidates. For example, by attending a MaDPAC-organized fundraiser, our federal lobbyist was able to directly share information on children’s mental health with the Speaker of the House and her political campaign.

Who: The Importance of Fellow Members

Especially in this Presidential election year, it is important to have experience, training and competence with all aspects of advocacy and political action. For fellows and early career psychiatrists, we must consider ourselves the advocates of the future. The children’s mental health laws being created and discussed in Washington today will determine the way we practice our profession and impact the lives of our patients and families. It is our responsibility and duty to participate because unless we educate, support and elect members of Congress who advocate for child and adolescent psychiatry and children’s mental health, the problems affecting our patients and us will go unresolved.

Historically, physicians are reluctant to engage in politics, with only half of eligible healthcare professionals voting.⁶ It is imperative that we influence the policies made today, because we have the expertise and knowledge to educate policy makers. Psychiatrist Dr. Stefan Priebe offers a call to action when he asks: “What credibility and what societal relevance do we have as a profession, if we disseminate the evidence in scientific journals, but do not care about the polit-

ical action required to implement it?”⁷ It has also been proposed by residents Dr. Anastasia Coutinho and Dr. Kristina Dakis in an Academic Medicine letter to the editor that “empowering trainees with skills to effect positive community or policy change may increase physicians’ sense of personal accomplishment and overall career satisfaction.”⁷ AACAP-PAC is one mechanism that empowers us to champion our cause and help to educate our legislators on needed policy changes to relieve suffering and improve human well-being. In the coming weeks, we encourage you to reach out to us, other board members of the AACAP-PAC or our staff to hear about our most recent efforts in Washington during this important election year.

Take Home Summary

As child and adolescent psychiatrists, we have many ways to advocate for our patients. One particularly powerful way that we want to highlight, especially during this election season, is through the use of political action. Our AACAP-PAC is working in Washington, DC right now to educate, support and elect Members of Congress and candidates who advocate for child and adolescent psychiatry and child mental health.

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