

State-Level Advocacy for the Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist: Changing the Rules of the Game

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Child and adolescent psychiatrists commonly face barriers to treating patients that extend beyond the practice setting. These barriers include lack of available treatment resources and modalities, inadequate support for youth in schools, and paucity of funding or significant stigma in the community. These are all challenges that can be addressed with advocacy efforts. While many practicing child and adolescent psychiatrists may not feel qualified to tackle these social issues, in 2015 the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) set “advocacy competencies” throughout patient care, medical knowledge, and systems-based practice milestones.¹ For those who may not feel proficient in advocacy skills, this article will offer guidance on steps clinicians can take to advocate at the local and state level.

As our professional code of ethics states: “*Principle VIII: Advocacy and Equity: Child and adolescent psychiatrists support the principle that competent mental health care and a full array of services should be available for all children, adolescents, and their families, and support efforts to improve access to care at the individual, local community, and national levels.*”² Advocacy can be many things, but in general it is applying one’s passion and expertise to solve a problem or accomplish a goal. Physicians immersed in clinical care may find the prospect of taking on the work of uncompensated advocacy daunting. State level advocacy can be an effective and achievable tool for child psychiatrists who are looking to improve care beyond their offices. Different forms of advocacy require varying amounts of time and commitment. Activities one can do with minimal commitment can still contribute to lasting change for the families we serve, a reward beyond a paycheck that you can feel proud of for the rest of your career. There are

many potential state avenues to advocate for improved mental health outcomes for youth (see [Table 1](#)).

Our pediatrician colleagues have been effectively promoting public health prevention measures, environmental safety, greater access to care for kids, and so on for decades.^{3,4} Modern day seatbelt laws, school mandated vaccinations, universal coverage of prenatal care and more were all originally ideas of concerned clinicians, often starting at the community and state level. In Jerome Paulson’s article “*Pediatric Advocacy*”, pediatricians have shared their experiences, including how to become a more effective advocate. The article details pediatricians’ advocacy contributions to changes of the cultural landscape, as well as concrete steps to improve advocacy skills.⁵ Child psychiatrists could use this model to both educate and inspire our actions as advocates.

There are many examples of how state level advocacy has been meaningful for children, teenagers, and families. In 2018, a bill was proposed in Colorado to add autism spectrum disorders to the list of certifying medical conditions to be treated with marijuana products. The debate was intense but, in the end, it was the voice of child and adolescent psychiatrists that led directly to Governor Hickenlooper vetoing this bill despite significant political pressure to sign. Child and adolescent psychiatrists in Colorado had an effective voice by sharing expert testimony during the legislative debate and meeting directly with the Governor Hickenlooper, as he was deciding to sign or veto this bill into becoming law.

This case illustrates the most appropriate adage, “the world is run by those that show up.” State level advocacy is often very much about “showing up.” State advocacy often involves engaging with the legislative process.

Table 1. Description of Local and State Advocacy Activities

POTENTIAL AVENUES FOR LOCAL AND STATE ADVOCACY		
ACTIVITY	HOW TO GET STARTED	TIME COMMITMENT
Serve as a resource for local schools and community organizations	Call or email administrative contact to volunteer	Varies: Speaking at community forums, sitting on advisory boards; 1 hour to monthly meetings
Write an Opinion Editorial for your local paper	Define a topic or a need, determine submission requirements	Varies: longer if research is needed; individual writing time varies
Send an email or call your personal legislator	State government websites have legislators' contact information Voter Voice will identify your legislator	Moments
Meet your state legislator and begin a relationship to inform, guide, and educate the legislator	Call or email to set up a meeting; more time available when "not in session"	Can be 15-minute meeting in office or longer for "coffee" Follow-ups with email relationship
Serve as an appointee to a state committee or commission	Usually, individual is asked to participate	Availability for regular meetings, these are likely time-limited appointments Could be 2-4 hours per month
Testify in favor or opposition of bills	First need alert about hearing for bill; this may come from your professional organization	Writing testimony: 1-2 hours Testifying: often ½ day
Join a coalition of like-minded professional organizations to guide policy development	Need to learn about the organizations/coalitions	Time spent attending meetings, reviewing emails, identifying opportunities

While trying to influence the political machine in Washington, DC, is complicated and challenging, this is may not be the case in your state government. Child psychiatrists can impact local or state government in ways that can span from very little time to a significant investment.

Engaging with state legislators^{7,8} is often an effective way to advocate. The child and adolescent psychiatrist, as an expert in mental health, can provide the knowledge to help guide policy decisions, and the only way to have a voice in the debate is to build relationships with state legislators. Setting up time to meet with a legislator to share your thoughts may be as simple as calling or emailing their office. Your local AACAP Regional Organization or American Psychological Association chapter may have a legislative committee that can also help facilitate these personal interactions in your state. Once the meeting has been arranged, be sure to have

a clear "ask" for your legislator. Do you hope they will support or vote against a specific bill? Is there an issue within their district that you need help crafting a bill to address? When preparing for this type of meeting, be ready to tell the legislator: **What is the cause? Why does it matter? Who does it impact? How can he or she help?** Be sure to thank them for their time, ask for follow up regarding your conversation, and leave a business card. Within 3-4 days, send them a follow up email to reinforce talking points and thank them again.

Washington State legislators speaking at the 2018 annual meeting of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry denoted a strong interest in pediatric mental health issues, and guided a discussion on how they welcome input from child psychiatrists.⁹ A child and adolescent psychiatrist may be offered an appointment to a state committee or commission

to provide expertise around children's mental health. Some workgroups meet for a limited tenure to resolve or investigate a specific issue. Other committees may include ongoing meetings where you represent the voice of the families in your state on a variety of policies. These opportunities are sporadic, so remaining visible in your community and known to your elected officials may result in these sorts of invitations. If a legislator is particularly aligned with your values, offering to volunteer for their election campaign is an opportunity to cement your relationship.

Another valuable experience in state level advocacy is testifying in a state committee hearing. Each state has its own distinct process for a bill becoming law, but all states have a public hearing process when debating if a bill becomes a law. This is an opportunity to provide expert testimony regarding the proposed legislation. Taking the time to testify in committee allows the child mental health provider to give expertise to a larger number of lawmakers at a crucial decision time for the law. When preparing testimony stick with the ABC's of testifying: be **Accurate, Brief, and Clear**. Remember that *facts* make the individual giving testimony credible, but *stories* make them memorable. Sharing patient stories can be an effective way of illustrating the importance of your testimony, but it is important to honor patient confidentiality and HIPAA laws. When testifying, clearly understand who you are representing: are you representing yourself, your place of employment, or your professional organization? Be sure to clarify if you are advocating as a concerned individual versus representing a larger affiliated group. If representing a group, it is vital to get permission and coordinate with any staff or representatives that may want to have input on what you do or don't say. If part of a coalition, one may receive guidance to develop testimony.

AACAP has prepared training materials and resources to help guide efforts specific to state level advocacy.⁶ One easy way to get involved is to sign up for regional and national grass roots alerts through the AACAP **Legislative Action Center's VoterVoice**. Once the individual has signed up for "VoterVoice", partici-

pants will receive "action alerts" via email that allows for contact with legislators on proposed legislation around mental health and healthcare needs of youth and families issues pertinent to AACAP members. Membership in AACAP may also include membership in a **Regional Organizations of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (ROCAP)**. ROCAPs represent child and adolescent psychiatrists in either a region of or the whole state and may offer resources for issues pertinent to the youth and families in that region. Each ROCAP should have at least one Advocacy Liaison who serves as the representative to guide regional advocacy efforts.

Building alliances with various stakeholders who are interested in the well-being of children and their families is a key component of effective advocacy. A natural avenue for child and adolescent psychiatry advocacy is within local schools. Whether through partnering with a school board to provide guidance on programs across a district or volunteering to speak at career day at a neighborhood school, forming relationships with local schools is a meaningful component of advocacy for the child and adolescent psychiatrist. There are specific trainings available to mentor and certify those interested in educating school faculty around teen mental health issues, such as the APA's **"Typical or Troubled"** program. Those interested may want to extend an offer of collaboration to school counselors when consulting on shared patients as one way to build this partnership. Most local school departments have websites outlining policy initiatives, contacts for their board of education, and other potential key contacts. Other community specific advocacy opportunities include partnering with organizations such as the local National Alliance on Mental Illness or Mental Health America chapter by getting involved in a specific event or offering to help out as a resource for families. Rotary Clubs and United Way Foundations often have annual campaign initiatives encompassing child mental health such as early childhood "best start" and prevention campaigns and may be interested in having child psychiatrists speak to their members or in the community. If you work in a hospital or healthcare center, your organization likely

has a legislative affairs department or lobbying group under contract. Involvement and suggesting priorities that are important to your patients is of great benefit and leverages your role within the organization.

In summary, advocacy is a key component of the professional identity of the child and adolescent psychiatrist. We have much to learn from our pediatric colleagues who have often led the way in effective advocacy for the wellbeing of children and teens at the state level. It is time we as child psychiatrists take our own leadership role in stewarding the future of mental health much as pediatricians have done for physical wellness. Becoming involved in advocacy at the local and state level can be an effective tool to lead policy change and effect the mental health of the children, teens and families we treat. In addition, it is rewarding and fun!

Take Home Summary

Advocacy at the state level is an effective and rewarding tool for the child and adolescent psychiatrist to support the families they serve beyond the scope of individual patient interactions. This article describes different advocacy initiatives available at the state and local level.

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