Psychiatrists Voice Needs of Patients on Hill Visits

Advocacy and involvement in the political process are “absolutely vital” if psychiatrists want lawmakers to address their concerns, says a member of Congress at APA's advocacy conference.

BY VABREN WATTS

With the recent and continued changes in health care laws, psychiatrists are ensuring that the rights and needs of those with mental illness are being discussed on Capitol Hill and that a new generation of psychiatrists continues to carry the torch.

On March 24, APA members, including many resident-fellow members, gathered in Washington, D.C., to kick off the three-day Advocacy Leadership Conference sponsored by APA.

“The goal of APA's advocacy infrastructure is to pull together our federal and state lobbyists, health systems, and communication operation into one well-oiled machine,” said Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A., CEO and medical director of APA, during opening remarks. Levin emphasized that all APA members play a critical role in advocating for mental health and that it is important to tell the stories of those living with mental illness to lawmakers and elected officials.

Since 2014 is an important year for electing those who can influence changes in laws, with November's congressional elections, keynote speaker Larry Sabato, Ph.D., spoke about how changes in Congress can be detrimental to the progress of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which builds on the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008. The political
Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.) is the recipient of APA’s 2014 Jacob K. Javits Award. The award was presented to him at APA’s Advocacy Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C., in late March.

Taking up the mantle of the late Sen. Paul Wellstone, Franken has become a lead advocate for mental health in Congress. Since passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, he has formed a bipartisan coalition of senators and representatives to urge the Obama administration to develop and promulgate a strong final rule on mental health parity. Franken has taken the lead on promoting early detection of mental illness in schools by introducing the bipartisan Mental Health in Schools Act (S 195) and supporting the bipartisan Senate mental health package (S 689) that reauthorizes early detection training resources. Given impending retirements in the Senate, he is poised to take on a more senior role in the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee and has indicated that mental health will remain one of his landmark issues for years to come.

Franken was selected for the award by APA’s Council on Advocacy and Government Relations.

“You don’t have to be a politician,” Johnson stated, “but it’s important to be aware of your state representatives and senators. . . . and know how they are voting on mental health issues. You have to take the time to educate yourself on the legislative process. It really does affect our everyday lives as psychiatrists and how we care for our patients.”

Rep. Tom Price (R-Ga.) agreed. Serving as a distinguished guest speaker, Price, who is an orthopedic surgeon, told attendees that advocacy and political engagement by psychiatrists are “absolutely vital” for Congress. Lawmakers need to hear from their psychiatrist constituents, he noted. And he advised the psychiatrists in attendance that during their next-day visits to Capitol Hill offices, it would be of utmost importance to ensure that patients are the primary topic of conversations. “Not too many people on Capitol Hill care about doctors, but they do care about patients—who are their constituents,” commented Price.

Price went on to discuss three principles of health care—affordability, accessibility, and quality—in addition to addressing proposed legislation to increase the number of psychiatrists in the Veterans Administration and legislation to decrease graduate medical education funding, which could put a strain on residency training programs.

The evening closed with breakout sessions concerning mental health care and policy and an awards dinner at which APA announced that Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.) was the recipient of its 2014 Jacob K. Javits Award for his advocacy on behalf of those living with mental illness (see box above).

Franken Wins APA’s Javits Award

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