

## 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

**W**ith 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



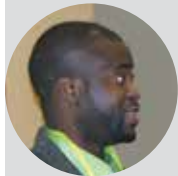
2

### Resident-Fellow Members and Early Career Psychiatrists Reflect on Advocacy Conference

Commenting on her experiences during APA’s Advocacy Leadership Conference, Crystal Mehta, D.O., a second-year psychiatry resident at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine, told *Psychiatric News*, “I have attended this conference twice. Each time I learned more about advocating for mental health care from a policy standpoint. As residents, we are taught to carry out actions that are in the best of interest of our patients. This is a great opportunity to learn how to do so.” Mehta said that she plans to apply for an APA-sponsored congressional fellowship.



Ade Adelakun, M.D., a third-year resident at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital and first-time conference attendee, said, “I was very intrigued by the remarks of Rep. Tom Price during the conference. It amazed me how he intertwined medicine and politics in providing quality care and meeting the needs of patients. I will definitely come back to attend next year’s conference.”



Dauda Griffin, M.D., medical director of Laurel Heights Hospital in Atlanta, said, “This is my first advocacy leadership training. Until this point, advocating on Capitol Hill seemed like a daunting task, but after the today’s [Capitol Hill] visits, it seems very doable. I look forward to becoming more involved with mental health care advocacy.”



1



3



# ASSOCIATION NEWS



4



5



6

**1** From left are Melinda Young, M.D., speaker of the Assembly; Kristin Kroeger, APA's chief of policy, programs, and practice; Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A., APA's CEO and medical director; political analyst Larry Sabato, Ph.D.; and Robert Cabaj, M.D., chair of APA's Council on Advocacy and Government Relations.

**2** APA members take a tour of Capitol Hill at this year's Advocacy Leadership Conference.

**3** Annelle Primm, M.D. (left), director of APA's Division of Diversity and Health Equity, poses with Elyn Johnson, M.D., APA's Jeanne Spurlock Congressional Fellow.

**4** Early career psychiatrist Jessica Chaudhary, M.D., listens to conference speakers.

**5** Dauda Griffin, M.D. (left), speaks with Rep. Tom Price (R-Ga.), an orthopedic surgeon.

**6** John Wernert, M.D., chair of the APAPAC Board of Directors, poses with Rep. Jackie Walorski (R-Ind.).

## Franken Wins APA's Javits Award

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.



analyst and the Robert Kent Gooch Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia said that the candidates elected to office this year—and in coming years—will have a lot of influence over whether the ACA will be sustained.

"All of it will be not thrown out, . . . but large portions of it could be overhauled," said Sabato.

Elyn Johnson, M.D., the 2014 APA Jeanne Spurlock, M.D., Congressional Fellow and a fourth-year psychiatry resident at the University Health Center at the University of Georgia, provided attendees with an overview of the daily tasks of a mental health advocate on Capitol Hill, while inspiring other resident-fellow members to apply for APA-sponsored fellowship programs.

She cautioned, however, that the congressional fellowship "is not a situation where you are able to go into an office and change everyone's mind. You will be working with people with opposing views, . . . and of [political] party affiliations different from your own. You will have to convince them why a particular issue in mental health care is important. . . . It requires a great amount of diligence and patience."

Johnson, who is a congressional fellow in the Department of Defense covering issues of sexual assault and suicide prevention in the military, said that she decided to apply for the Spurlock fellowship after participating in multiple APA advocacy events. She emphasized to other psychiatry residents who may be interested in becoming congressional fellows the importance of their career and their patients of being active in politics.

"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). **PN**