Mixing Politics with Practice

How psychologists can influence policy at the state and federal level

Whether managing an independent practice, working for an institution or in another setting, psychologists can get caught up in the day-to-day realities of making a living. They may be focused on treating patients, accomplishing administrative tasks and getting through the week. The idea of adding advocacy to the mix – writing letters to elected officials or donating to a political action committee – may not be a priority. However, your professional success depends on it.

“Psychologists need to know how their profession and their professional practice, regardless of where they are located, is impacted by state and federal legislation and regulation. For that reason, it’s important that advocacy be an integral part of graduate training,” says Practice Organization Executive Director for Professional Practice Katherine C. Nordal, PhD.

Professional practice is shaped by a number of political systems, Nordal says. And as a result of the 2016 elections, many of those political systems have undergone significant changes. The U.S. Congress added more than 60 new members at the start of the year. The balance of power in several state legislative chambers and governorships also shifted from one political party to the other.

“There are a lot of changes in the political landscape. There are people with new perspectives. We have to as a field understand what those perspectives are and we have to have the resources to influence those decision-makers,” says Arthur C. Evans, Jr, PhD, CEO of the American Psychological Association and APA Practice Organization.

“Now is the most important time probably in the history of psychology practice to understand the importance of stepping up and making sure that we’re engaged in the political process,” Evans says.

Psychologists change practice by changing policy.
Prior to the 1980s, there was no APA work unit dedicated specifically to issues that affected practicing psychologists
and their businesses. That void was one of the main drivers for APA’s formation of the Practice Directorate – a unit serving the needs of practicing psychologists, says Practice Organization Associate Executive Director of Government Affairs Doug Walter, JD. Ultimately, the APA Practice Organization was formed in 2001 as a 501(c)(6) to advocate on reimbursement and marketplace issues for practicing psychologists.

The Practice Directorate’s first task was to get services provided by clinical psychologists reimbursed by Medicare, a government insurance program established in the 1960s. In 1989, Congress changed the law to give psychologists the authority to treat Medicare beneficiaries independently in outpatient settings and bill for their services. This policy victory for practicing psychologists shifted the way psychological services were viewed and paid for not just by Medicare, but by private insurers as well.

“Medicare is the largest federal health program. Because it’s such a large insurer, it actually impacts the entire health insurance market. Getting psychologists into the program was major,” Walter says.

But Nordal stresses that getting psychologists’ services covered by Medicare didn’t happen overnight. It took grassroots advocacy and years of persistent lobbying.

Policy wins for practicing psychologists didn’t end with Medicare. The Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA) became law in 2008, ending decades of insurance plan discrimination against services offered by mental health providers. The APA Practice Organization worked with members of Congress and U.S. presidents to enact and implement the law that requires insurance companies to cover mental health services at parity with other health care treatments.

“There were a lot of cooks in that kitchen,” says Richard Frank, PhD, professor of health economics in the Department of Health Care Policy at Harvard Medical School. “Psychologists had strong advocates, for example, in the parity implementation coalition, that I know APA is part of. You also had a lot of parity champions in Congress,” Frank says.

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– Doug Walter, JD

Practicing psychologists then relied on the relationships that they’d built through years of advocacy with the “champions” of mental health care to help enact the Affordable Care Act.

“The ACA is a culmination of many separate and different advocacy efforts by the association on behalf of our profession,” Walter says. “Practicing psychologists took the lead on patient protections, consumer protections, provider protections, preexisting conditions, and provider nondiscrimination, provisions that we worked on throughout the 1990s and early 2000s with physician and non-physician groups. We wrote a lot of the provisions that ultimately ended up in the Affordable Care Act,” Walter says.

The ACA provided additional insurance protections and increased parity for psychological services, while also extending insurance coverage to independent practitioners and their family members who previously did not have access to health insurance plans.

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Contributing to the Psychology PAC, (see PAC infographic, page 25) contacting legislators, and participating in debates on policy at all levels of government are a few
The APA Practice Organization is the only national organization promoting the professional interests of psychologists in all practice settings. It’s a legally separate companion organization to APA. Because of APA’s tax status as a charitable organization, it cannot legally advocate for practitioners’ marketplace interests.

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― Arthur C. Evans, Jr, PhD

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things that psychologists can do. And if you can’t run for office yourself, psychologists should consider building relationships with the people who are in office.

“I do think the changes in the political environment give us new opportunities to broaden how people look at us,” Evans says. “The opportunity is to not only reinforce the importance of mental health practitioners within health care, but to point out how psychologists’ skills can be very valuable in health care settings.”

Nordal stresses that political systems don’t change rapidly. But if psychologists commit to staying informed and getting involved they have the power to shape the future of psychology practice.

Written by Jewel Edwards-Ashman