State political action committees (PACs) can be just as significant as federal PACs when it comes to political giving. According to an analysis by the Sunlight Foundation, a nonpartisan nonprofit advocating for open government, PACs spent more money on state-level candidates in 23 states during the 2012 election cycle than they did on federal candidates in all 50 states. The analysis, reported by The Washington Post (Sept. 16, 2013), showed that state-level PACs contributed $1.4 billion to candidates running for governor, attorney general, state legislative and other state-level offices.

Money talks, and active state PACs can be influential in filling the pipeline of elected officials at every level of state and local government. “State association PACs play a critical role in recruiting and supporting candidates who support issues relevant to psychologists and their patients,” says Jennifer Johnson, director of Psychology PAC (www.supportpsychologypac.org) in the APA Practice Organization. PACs provide a vehicle for psychologists to advocate for their profession with legislators. “The purpose of a PAC is to establish relationships with candidates and have them get to know us,” says Jo Linder-Crow, PhD, chief executive officer of the California Psychological Association (CPA). “We take seriously psychologist candidates running for public office and work to support them, even at a very local level, like a school board position.”

There is also value in showing up for campaign events and delivering a contribution in person. “When you contribute to a legislator’s campaign, you create an opportunity to begin a dialogue and develop an important relationship,” says Connie Galietti, JD, director of legal and professional affairs in the APA Practice Organization.

Galietti, a former executive director of the Florida Psychological Association, managed the state association’s PAC. “In Florida, the state psychological association got appointments with legislators to discuss important issues because they knew us from fundraising activities,” says Galietti. “Showing up to political fundraisers helped us establish a foundation for building a relationship. In some instances, that relationship helped in advocating with legislators to be open to amendments to legislation or softening language in a bill relevant to psychologists.”

“Face time is critical with candidates because it puts a human face on the issues relevant to psychologists,” says Johnson. “Personal stories shared by psychologists directly with candidates are compelling. When a psychologist speaks in person to legislators and candidates, they hear directly from one of their constituents.”

“It helps to have a check delivered by a constituent, instead of a lobbyist,” says Galietti. “Candidates and legislators listen to their constituents. Psychologists need to show up and shake hands, so the candidates associate you with the envelope and conversation.”

By Luana Bossolo

How to start and manage a state PAC

Eighteen state psychological associations have a PAC. Many of those associations understand that running a PAC involves year-round activities, not just sending a fundraising letter to your members once a year. Whether your state association currently has a PAC or is considering establishing one, Linder-Crow and Galietti offer the following tips on starting and managing a PAC.

• Understand fully why your state psychological association wants to start a PAC, advises Galietti. There are costs to establishing and operating PACs including administrative and set-up fees.
• Make sure your membership can support a PAC. The reality is that members’ pockets aren’t deep. If you have a small association with few members and a tight budget, then you may be limited by how much money you can raise.
• Hire an attorney familiar with campaign finance laws in your state who can help your association file the required paperwork with the state division of elections.
• Retain an accountant experienced with campaign finances. Most states have reporting and disclosure requirements to track contributions to a PAC and money distributed to candidates. The National Conference of State Legislatures (www.ncsl.org) has information on campaign contribution limits for all 50 states. Another helpful resource is www.FollowTheMoney.org which tracks state-by-state contributions to state and federal candidates by election year.
• Keep bylaws for a PAC separate from your state association bylaws and establish an independent board (which may be called board of directors or board of trustees). Linder-Crow says her state association’s PAC, known as CPA-PAC, is managed out of the California Psychological Association’s office but has a separate board of trustees.
• Appoint members to the PAC board who are active political givers. Linder-Crow and Galietti recommend that all members of the PAC’s board of trustees be required to contribute to the state association PAC.
• Set goals and determine a PAC contribution strategy, advises Linder-Crow. Identify doable fundraising target levels and activities. CPA-PAC gives to legislators on key committees or who hold influential positions in the state legislature that could have an impact on issues affecting psychologists.

The difference between state and federal PACs

PAC laws vary from state to state with each state having their own unique campaign finance laws that govern the activities of a state PAC. Most of the time, the secretary of state’s office oversees the filings and activities of state PACs.

State PACs are limited to contributing to campaigns for governor, state house and senate seats as well as county level political offices; whereas, federal PACs support federal level candidates running for Congress.

Federal PACs are highly regulated and required to follow the rules and regulations under the purview of the Federal Election Commission. Psychology PAC, housed in the APA Practice Organization, concentrates on political candidates at the federal level who support legislative issues important to psychologists.

The importance of supporting state and federal PACs

Since legislation occurs both at the state and federal levels, it’s important to make sure that psychologists are heard at both levels. Sometimes there may be an overlap at the federal and state levels on some legislative issues, but there are often legislative issues unique to each level of government that are relevant to psychologists, such as federal laws about Medicare reimbursement or state licensing laws.

Says Johnson, “Since the Psychology PAC only contributes to candidates at the federal level, it is important that state associations develop state PACs to ensure the profession is protected at the state level.”