For Shannon Edwards, PsyD, legislative advocacy is a reward and a challenge indelibly linked to her work as a clinician. But she was fiercely committed to effecting change long before becoming a psychologist. In fact, she can trace her passion for advocacy back to her childhood, when, outraged by the cancellation of the sitcom Full House, she petitioned her neighbors to bring the show back.

“I was certain that if I went door-to-door and got enough signatures, they’d put it back on the air,” she recalls.

In a way, her efforts were successful, as a sequel to the sitcom was released on Netflix recently, over 20 years later. “That feels like how long it can take for things to happen in Congress, so I suppose it was a good lesson!”

Now, Edwards is a forensic clinical psychologist and mental health reform advocate in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has a private practice, where she specializes in court-mandated services for juveniles, adults and families, and she also regularly testifies as an expert witness in family and criminal law courts. Her work gives her the opportunity to observe the effects of mental health policies on the people she serves, the public, and other practitioners. It has also motivated and empowered her to improve those policies at local, state and federal levels.

The early Full House campaign aside, Edwards says her advocacy took shape while she was working as an intern at Torrance State Hospital in southwestern Pennsylvania. There, she observed that patients at the hospital – who were not only very ill, but often disenfranchised, without family support or state resources – were receiving substandard care.

“Psychologists and other licensed professionals weren’t drawn to working in this environment, so as with other state institutions, the hospital was staffed by well-intentioned but unlicensed individuals,” she says. “Furthermore, patients would cycle through treatment, jail and back, without continued care resolutions available. I wanted to get involved and help change those conditions.”

So she did. Edwards helped pass Pennsylvania’s Psychological Practice Modernization Act of 2016, which – among other things – amended existing laws permitting unlicensed professionals working in county, state and federal institutions to do work of a psychological nature, such as testing or supervision. These individuals are now required to be licensed.

But bridging gaps in services is an ongoing challenge, Edwards says. “We need more psychologists to work in state hospitals, jails and prisons to fill the employment void.”

As her career moved forward, Edwards learned how to problem-solve at the institutions where she worked. “While funding was always an issue, many problems stemmed from simple gaps in communication between agencies, organizations, patients and families. I’ve found that a lot of problems can be solved just by sitting people down and talking.”

This “sit down and talk” approach has served her well in forming strategic partnerships and helping to pass legislation that expands mental health services.

“I see advocacy as relationship-building,” she says. “Psychologists are uniquely positioned to do this—it’s what we do in our work as clinicians. We understand how to bridge gaps in communication between lawmakers, organizations, and the public. And we are especially qualified to convey to lawmakers how policies will affect the people we serve.”

One of Edwards’ most significant advocacy successes was with the Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2016, which was sponsored by Rep. Tim Murphy,
“There is a movement happening in our country right now. This is great time to get involved and effect positive change for mental health, psychology and human well-being in general.”  
— Shannon Edwards, PsyD

R-Pa. The law, originally introduced in the aftermath of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, contains many provisions reforming the nation’s approach to mental health, including expanded support for the education and training of psychologists.

Edwards first learned about Murphy’s bill from a family she was working with at Torrance, whom she credits with changing the course of her advocacy work. Inspired, she reached out to the Congressman’s D.C. staff, and from there continued to work with him and others on the bill as it stalled, was reintroduced, and finally became law in 2016. She did this work in partnership with Doug Walter, JD, the associate executive director of the APA Practice Organization’s government relations department.

“Dr. Edwards is a great advocate for the profession of psychology,” Walter says. “She built a great relationship with a member of Congress, has acted as a good resource on mental health issues and has been persistent about requesting support for those issues.”

When Edwards first began advocating for national mental health reform, she was frustrated with the process—she felt that lawmakers didn’t understand mental health. But then she realized that this dynamic was similar to her work-related interactions.

“When I’m in court giving expert testimony, and the judge has questions about psychological testing, for example, I’m not defensive. I just use the opportunity to explain things like the reliability and validity of my evaluations.”

Talking with lawmakers presents that same educational opportunity, she says.

“If we don’t educate them, then they won’t know, and they’ll make many of their decisions based on economics. We just have to go to them with an open mind and talk, face-to-face, about how policies affect our patients and our practice.”

Now, Edwards is focusing her advocacy efforts on the Medicare Mental Health Access Act (MMHAA) (S.2597, H.R.4277), which would include psychologists in Medicare’s physician definition and remove barriers to care.

The MMHAA has support on both sides of the aisle, because “mental health knows no partisanship,” she says.

Psychologists have a significant professional stake in policy outcomes. However, Edwards understands that psychologists have historically been hesitant to get involved in politics. To counter that reluctance, she would encourage colleagues to take advantage of the current swell of locally-focused activism and robust civic engagement in the U.S.

“There is a movement happening in our country right now. This is great time to get involved and effect positive change for mental health, psychology and human well-being in general.”

Psychologists’ part in the movement doesn’t need to be resistant; it just needs to be constructive, she says.

“Simply calling your senators and representatives is a great start, and really important. If you want to do more, join a regional network of psychologists—or start one! Come together in a way that’s beneficial to your community.”

Edwards acknowledges that committing to this kind of work is easier said than done. “If you can’t give your time, donate,” she advises. “Join the Practice Organization and give to the Psychology PAC; they’re pushing for changes on a national level that will affect us all.”

Written by Hannah Calkins