



FINDING BALANCE

Understanding Advocacy

Kate Boatright, VMD

Every year when association membership renewals arrive, I hear the same question: “Why should I join?” Common answers include liability insurance and CE opportunities. But one of the most critical activities of our professional organizations is often overlooked—advocacy.

Every year veterinary medical associations (VMAs) and other professional interest organizations spend extensive time and money advocating for our profession with the legislature and providing programming to address critical issues. If we needed a reminder of how important advocacy is, the year 2020 provided a perfect example.

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

Advocacy in the veterinary profession can generally be

divided into legislative and non-legislative efforts. Legislative advocacy occurs at all levels of government and is often coordinated by our VMAs and other professional organizations. Advocacy is “a way to elevate our profession,” says Dr. MJ McNamee, chair of the Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association’s Legislative and Regulatory Affairs Committee. She adds that advocacy efforts offer veterinary professionals the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues in a non-confrontational way as they work toward common goals.

At the heart of successful advocacy is relationship building. “There is no such thing as an effective, one-person advocacy group,” says Dr. Will McCauley. “The problems our profession are up against are simply too vast to be handled by any single individual.”

Through effective advocacy, veterinarians can demonstrate the broad extent of our education, represent the best our profession has to offer, and protect our professional future. Additionally, successful advocacy efforts include educating the public, legislature, and key stakeholders on critical issues—both those that directly affect day to day practice, such as prescription mandates, and ancillary issues, such as animal welfare and public health, that we are uniquely qualified to discuss.

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There are numerous non-legislative advocacy efforts focused on moving our profession toward a more positive future by addressing serious issues, such as diversity and wellbeing. These are critical issues in our profession, and there are numerous groups currently advocating for solutions. The work of these groups, such as the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association (MCVMA, mcvma.org) and the 9 other affinity organizations that make up Veterinary Medicine Interconnected (VMI), is both necessary and exceptional, but beyond the scope of this article.

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

In practice, we act as a voice for our patients, advocating for their best interests. To continue having the freedom to practice the way we want, we must have a voice in government.

“Thousands of newly elected state legislators were sworn-in to office in January 2021. Almost none of them have any expertise on veterinary medicine or animal health. However, many of them will be voting on issues ranging from veterinary service taxes to registered veterinary nurse certifications,” says Marcie Whichard, Vice President of Professional and Community Relations at the NAVC. “It’s crucial that we stay informed on the legislation our state and federal leaders are considering and raise our voices to ensure they’re making decisions that don’t undermine our work.”

Though many individuals find politics uncomfortable, Dr. Bridget Heilsberg, chair of the AVMA Political Action Committee (PAC), stresses that “personal feelings are not as important as the health of the profession.” We must work and partner with legislators who are supportive of our initiatives, regardless of their political affiliation. Dr. Heilsberg states that the AVMA is respected by legislators from both major political parties because it is known to be bipartisan. This allows representatives to meet with members of both parties during tense political times while larger companies and organizations are denied meetings due to their strongly conflicting political views. But to remain truly bipartisan, they cannot take a hardline stance on some hot-button issues, which can frustrate some members.

SUCCESSFUL ADVOCACY

The NAVC’s advocacy initiative, Embrace (navc.com/embrace), has focused on issues such as a Registered Veterinary Nurse licensure in Ohio, expansion of

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service dog programs for veterans living with severe PTSD, and the One Health Act, which aims to give veterinary health professionals input on preventing and mitigating the spread of future zoonotic disease outbreaks. Embrace provides veterinary professionals with tools to stay updated on proposed legislation that will impact pet health and makes it easy for them to email, call, or even tweet their congressional representatives and make their voice heard.

Another voice for the profession, the AVMA has successfully engaged in advocacy for years but demonstrated the true strength of its work during the COVID-19 pandemic. “The entire AVMA advocacy staff worked around the clock during the early, uncertain days of the COVID pandemic,” says Dr. Kent McClure, Chief Government Relations Officer at the AVMA. This was also true for the staff of many state VMAs. These efforts focused on the veterinary profession being classified as “essential,” the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) passing, and the provision of pandemic student loan relief. Since its inception, the PPP has protected more than 200 000 veterinary jobs, according to the AVMA. Dr. McClure states, “Knowing that our work helped a very large number of veterinarians—with 56% of the veterinary practices in the country accessing the Paycheck Protection Program and with the principal and interest payments on federal student loan debt being suspended—is very professionally rewarding.” After the success of these initial advocacy efforts, both the AVMA and state VMAs continue to advocate for the profession in state and federal legislature as the pandemic drags on.

Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, another 2020 advocacy victory for the AVMA was their influence on the Department of Transportation’s (DOT) new rule on “Traveling by Air with Service Animals,” which now

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allows emotional support animals to be classified as pets, rather than service animals, for the purposes of air transport. This protects the role of trained service animals and the humans who benefit from these services. Additionally, the DOT has developed a standardized form that no longer requires a veterinarian to attest to the animal's behavior during a flight, which has been a concern of many practitioners who are unable to predict how an animal will react in a novel situation such as a flight. The AVMA collaborated with numerous stakeholders and the DOT to represent the interest of veterinarians, public health, and animal welfare in the final version of this rule.

GET INVOLVED

While there are passionate people in our profession who have taken the lead on advocacy efforts, success requires the support of individuals. Finding people to actively participate in advocacy efforts can be difficult. Lack of participation may sometimes be due to limited

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time or interest, but in many cases, individuals just aren't sure how to get involved.

Here are several suggestions for ways to join advocacy efforts in the veterinary profession, even if you have limited time:

- **Join and maintain membership with the AVMA and your state VMA.** Some dues dollars support advocacy efforts. Additionally, the more people that our VMAs can say they represent when speaking with politicians, the stronger their voices are.
- **Contribute to a Political Action Committee.** PAC contributions are pooled to support the political campaigns of individuals who, if elected, will be in a position to affect change on key issues affecting the profession.
- **Stay aware of and support ongoing advocacy efforts.** Read your emails to stay up-to-date on advocacy efforts. You can sign up for updates through the AVMA Congressional Advocacy Network (AVMACAN, avmacan.avma.org). “The AVMA encourages veterinarian constituents to talk directly to lawmakers about the issues most important to them and their profession,” says Dr. Douglas Kratt, AVMA President. In many cases, when there is a widespread advocacy effort, form letters will be available for customization. Check out the Embrace Advocacy Handbook for specific ways to connect with elected officials and get involved (navc.com/embrace).
- **Set up a meeting with your local state representatives** to introduce yourself as an expert in animal health and offer yourself as a resource should they have questions about legislation involving animal health, welfare, or other related issues.
- **If you want to see advocacy in action, participate in fly-ins or legislative days** hosted by the AVMA or your state VMA.
- **Be kind to those who are active in advocacy efforts.** The AVMA Government Relations Division, VMAs, and other professional interest groups are “staffed by real people,” says Dr. Heilsberg, “and the majority of volunteers are your peers.”

Those who want to support non-legislative initiatives they are passionate about can do so by joining professional interest groups, communicating with their state's VMA members and delegates to the AVMA, and volunteering for committees that address these issues at the state and national level. You do not have to be in an officer position of an organization to effect change or participate in advocacy—just reach out and ask how to get involved. **TVP**