



Advocacy, News Articles, Washington Report

Chapter leaders storm Capitol Hill with 'united voice for children'

by Devin Miller, Washington Correspondent

AAP chapter leaders from all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico traveled to the nation's capital in late February to urge their members of Congress to protect children's health care coverage.

The AAP Chapter Leaders Fly-In, made possible by the Friends of Children Fund, was an opportunity for AAP leaders to introduce themselves and the Academy's priorities for children's health to a new Congress and presidential administration.

"Each leader brings a unique perspective to the critical advocacy work before us, from those who live and treat patients in rural America to those who work in our country's largest cities," said AAP President Fernando Stein, M.D., FAAP, in a communication to all AAP members. "Our patient stories, our advocacy journeys and the issues that drive them may vary, but together, we represent one strong and united voice for children."

The evening prior to their visits on Capitol Hill, chapter leaders and members of the AAP Committee on Federal Government Affairs (COFGA) convened for a networking reception at the AAP Washington Office. The next morning, participants attended a training where they heard from AAP leaders and legislative staff about the importance of pediatrician advocacy and the current state of play on issues related to children's access to health care.

"There is nobody who you will meet with today who was not once a child," AAP CEO/Executive Vice President Karen Remley, M.D., M.B.A., M.P.H., FAAP, reassured the group before their meetings on Capitol Hill.

In the afternoon, chapter leaders and COFGA members visited more than 150 congressional offices, and about 30 of these meetings were with representatives and senators. At the time, federal legislators were deliberating on major changes to health reform. Attendees had three main messages: keep Medicaid strong, extend funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program and preserve the Affordable Care Act's gains for children. They also were equipped with new state **fact sheets** (<http://bit.ly/2mx2gCj>) showing how all three programs have worked together to bring the rate of children's health insurance coverage in the United States to a historic high - 95%.

Sharon L. Swindell, M.D., FAAP, president-elect of the AAP Michigan Chapter, was a guest of Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) at President Donald Trump's address to a joint session of Congress. Dr. Swindell participated in several media interviews with the senator in advance, highlighting the importance of health care coverage to children in Michigan.

Reflecting on her experience, Dr. Swindell offered advice to aspiring advocates. "Never underestimate the power of your voice," she said. "The lesson I learned is that when you start advocating early on in your career and continue to stay involved, you can find yourself in the gallery for the State of the Union address, taking part in ways you could have never imagined."

In addition to the efforts in Washington, AAP members took action from home, contacting their members of Congress and sharing messages on social media using #Docs4Coverage. On the day of the fly-in, more than 1,000 tweets were shared using #Docs4Coverage for a total of 2.3 million impressions (the total number of times the hashtag appeared on Twitter feeds).

Chapter leaders who attended the fly-in had the opportunity to share what they learned with their own state delegations during the AAP Annual Leadership Forum in March. During the congressional recess in April, they will build on the foundations set in Washington by attending in-district meetings with their federal leaders.



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AAP News

Advocacy, News Articles, Washington Report

Janice L. Pelletier, M.D., FAAP, president of the AAP Maine Chapter, said she looks forward to bringing what she learned back to pediatricians in her state and AAP district.

"It felt so powerful to get together with everyone in one room, with every state represented," she said.

Ankoo Y. Shah, M.D., FAAP, vice president of the AAP D.C. Chapter, called the experience invigorating.

"It was a reminder that we are all in this together and a reminder of why we do what we do," he said. "Kids are a bipartisan issue."

AAP amplifies advocacy messages on social media

One way the Academy uses social media is to amplify its voice on child health advocacy priorities. For example, the Academy posted the tweet on the right after sending a letter to leaders in the U.S. House of Representatives opposing the American Health Care Act. The bill, which would repeal much of the Affordable Care Act and make significant changes to Medicaid, was released at press time.

In a span of less than 48 hours, the message was retweeted more than 1,000 times, including interactions from pediatricians, members of the media, partner organizations and legislators, making it one of the Academy's top social media posts in terms of engagement. The tweet resulted in more than 150,000 impressions, which is the number of times it appeared on Twitter news feeds, helping to further amplify the Academy's position on the bill.