



engaging
legislators

&

**building
relationships**

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Just a few months into the 2017-2018 legislative session, the 253 members of the General Assembly face some daunting challenges. Hundreds of bills have already been introduced, and thousands will come before them in the next two years. Changes on the federal landscape appear likely to affect state programs and funding, and the prospect of a \$3 billion shortfall in the state budget looms for FY 2017-2018.

So how does the county message cut through all of this to ensure county priorities are at the forefront of legislators' minds as they begin to craft policy and shape future budgets?

Legislative members really need to hear from their local folks directly.

“We need to be in contact with the state more than ever given the increased role of counties and decreased funding, and the state needs to be aware of the challenges we face.”

– *Gary Eichelberger
Cumberland County
commissioner*

There’s an old saying that all politics is local, reflects Cumberland County Commissioner Gary Eichelberger. But it still rings true.

“Legislative members really need to hear from their local folks directly,” says Eichelberger. “We can provide a forum to say what is relevant to us and ask our legislators if their position is the same.”

Eichelberger says that although state funding has been declining – a long-term trend that seems to be getting worse – the county feels it can combat it by forging a relationship with its legislative delegation. To that end, the county has for many years made it a priority to invite their legislative delegation in several times a year as a means of connecting and building bridges between the state

and county government.

“The relationship between the state and counties is very interdependent,” Eichelberger explains. “The state depends on us to execute state programs, especially human services, so we started initiating meetings as a means of discussing current relevant issues.”

Larry Thomas, Cumberland County’s chief clerk, says the county works hard to identify the issues that are most essential for the meetings, and develops briefing papers in advance with the salient background and what the county wants to know from its legislators. The meetings follow a structured approach, with time to present the issues and for questions. Importantly, Thomas emphasizes, the county talks about how the issues impact people on the local level.

“These meetings are a good opportunity to give legislators an overview of the things we are working on that may or may not be on their radar, because they also have a lot of things going on,” says Eichelberger.

Dauphin County commissioner Mike Pries said he and his colleagues also have learned that if they don’t directly contact some of their legislators to share the importance of an issue, the legislators are most likely hearing from other constituents or

other agencies with other agendas. “Counties have to reach out to their legislators – they are pulled in different directions so it is the counties’ responsibility to reach out to them several times a year just to keep in touch,” Pries adds.

In Luzerne County, council members have an active legislative committee whose task also is to dialogue with state and federal officials. The county has held legislative roundtables to which they invite all senators and representatives who touch the county in some way.

“We see a lot of value in letting our legislators know where we stand,” says County Council Member Harry Haas. As the county felt the impacts of the FY 2015-2016 state budget impasse, they communicated their needs to their legislative delegation and discussed what they had to do at the county level to get by, including cutting services.

“We want to convey to the state that we are an extension of the state and fulfilling state mandates,” says Haas, “and therefore we want to make sure the state is equipping us with resources.” Sometimes, he added, it seems legislators think counties are entities unto themselves, Haas added, but in reality the county is really only as good as the funding it gets from the state.

Eichelberger says that educational element was critical for Cumberland County during the impasse as well, as they were able to explain what human services are provided at the local level and what the budget crisis meant to them. “We provided firsthand knowledge that was not just an article in the newspaper, and it was valuable to our legislators to get specifics on the programs their constituents rely on,” he says.

Counties have significant impact through their grassroots efforts.

“When we put all of our counties together with CCAP, we have a much stronger voice as an aggregate.”

– *Mike Pries*
Dauphin County commissioner

In 2015, the June 30 sunset date for the 9-1-1 legislation was rapidly approaching, while at the same time the outdated law in existence desperately needed to be updated to better reflect today’s technologically advanced environment. To provide an on-the-ground look at this key function of public safety, many counties invited their legislators to come take a personal tour of their 911 call centers, one of the key functions of public safety.

Pries recalls the impact that had in really helping legislators understand what goes on in a 9-1-1 center. “They

saw we had a state of the art facility, and could understand our call volume, where the calls came from, the types of calls and the people who are making those calls,” Pries says.

As the 9-1-1 legislation moved through the legislature, several leaders on the issue noted the significant impact that counties had through their grassroots efforts, with the ultimate result that the bill was signed into law just one day ahead of the June 30 sunset date.

“We got it done together,” Pries says. “It was awesome.”

ADVICE FROM COUNTIES

Provide relevant background, identify the county’s concerns, and be clear what you are asking of the legislators. Don’t load up your meeting agenda too much – you either end up covering issues in a superficial way, or you miss important things that you should have covered. Having county staff who are the most familiar with an issue discuss it with the legislator makes all the difference in the world.

– *Larry Thomas*

The commissioners also invite staff to these functions and give them a seat at the table, because they have a fundamental recognition that staff are critical.

– *Gary Eichelberger*

When coming to Hershey or Harrisburg for CCAP events or other meetings, take advantage of those times to set up meetings at the Capitol, or to just stop in and visit.

– *Mike Pries*

**Every interaction
helps build lasting
relationships.**

GREAT SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Need additional ideas, suggestions or resources to hold your own county meeting? Check out CCAP's Pennsylvania Counties Are fact sheet, our Grassroots Tool Kit and guidelines for organizing legislative visits, available at www.pacounties.org under the Government Relations/ Legislative Action tabs.

For up to the minute information on legislative activity, check out the Legislative Action Center at www.pacounties.org, see our bi-weekly Legislative Bulletin e-newsletter, or follow us on Twitter, @PACountiesGR.

Contact CCAP's Government Relations team at PACountiesGR@pacounties.org before your legislative meetings with questions and to get a heads up on all the issues you need to know.



www.pacounties.org

"Anything that brings attention to our issues is not time poorly spent."

– *Harry Haas*
Luzerne County council member

Face-to-face meetings make the issues more memorable, and every interaction helps to build lasting relationships that go beyond just a single meeting.

At the same time, Thomas recommends that counties be judicious in how often they space out meetings with their legislators, and use other means of follow up in between.

Pries said Dauphin County tries to maintain an open line of communication with their delegation when there are important issues – through meetings, phone calls, speaking to legislators at events – and their delegation has been on the forefront in moving things forward on the county's behalf.

Eichelberger agreed. "Our meetings have been pretty successful, but we continue to see our legislators in different capacities, so it's good to build relationships," he said.

Haas pointed out that creating a broad public awareness also is critical.

For instance, as a member of CCAP's Assessment and Taxation Committee who has come to Harrisburg to talk with legislators about the Association's tax fairness priority, Haas pointed out that the general public is focused on school property taxes, and counties are often forgotten.

"I've been tailoring my messages in council meetings," Haas noted, "and am being more vocal about explaining what the county does."

Counties have no shortage of issues facing them in 2017, including grave concerns about the reports on state finances and what they may mean for state funding for critical human services, as well as counties' ability to provide critical services to residents should another state budget impasse occur. For that reason, counties overwhelmingly selected human services funding and budget issues as their top priority for 2017.

The challenges are many. But so are the opportunities, and counties have the ability to be significant influencers. As Pries puts it, "It is our responsibility and no one else's to move these initiatives forward. And unless we are making legislators' phones ring, we won't be a priority."

What kind of influencers will Pennsylvania's counties be this session? 📌