


HTNYS


Trustee Leader

Information, policy developments, and educational opportunities for health care trustees

Health Care Trustees: Essential Partners in Advocacy

The trustees of New York State's hospitals and health care provider organizations have a long tradition of advocating on behalf of their institutions and communities. This active engagement by voluntary trustees in legislative advocacy has had a significant impact on the outcome of legislative and public policy debates at the state and federal levels.

This issue of Trustee Leader examines:

- the trustee role in advocacy from the chief executive officer (CEO) and trustee perspectives;
- how the definition of advocacy is evolving;
- the changing nature of trustee advocacy; and
- the partnership between health care trustees and administrative leaders who have joined forces to fight on behalf of their institutions and communities, the driving forces behind this advocacy partnership, and the benefits of such a partnership.

The Importance of Trustee Advocacy: The CEO Perspective

Over the years, health care trustees have increasingly been called upon to be active partners in legislative and regulatory advocacy. As the health care environment has become more challenging, it has become imperative that hospital and health care CEOs become more engaged not only in advocacy but also in developing and activating grassroots networks of concerned community members. To build this support, CEOs have turned to their voluntary board members and sought their active involvement in grassroots advocacy.

"Health care chief executive officers in New York have been effectively engaged in grassroots advocacy for so many years that it feels like we may have trampled the grass," said John Remillard, President of Aurelia Osborn Fox Memorial Hospital in Oneonta. "We discovered that in order to be most effective, it's absolutely essential for trustees to be engaged in advocacy and lobbying."

Experience has shown that trustee advocacy with elected representatives carries a very powerful message and that trustees can be your most effective advocate.

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“Trustees have more influence with legislators because they are voluntary board members and community leaders,” said Daniel Sisto, President of the Healthcare Association of New York State (HANYS). “There is far greater impact when these local business and community leaders bring issues to the legislators’ attention. Politicians pay attention to trustees because a trustee’s livelihood does not depend on a hospital’s financials.”

Trustees have been catapulted into the advocacy arena as dollars have become tighter and health care issues have become more complex, according to Daniel Walsh, President and CEO of Long Island’s Winthrop-University Hospital. “This has led to trustees’ role and commitment extending beyond the hospital to include advocacy,” he said.

“On Long Island, we have a long history of trustee involvement,” said Mr. Walsh. “Our trustees get together with local legislators and let them know they are concerned. We have found this to be very effective advocacy.”

“One of the keys to keeping trustees engaged is education,” explained Mr. Walsh. “Complicated issues require more education and collective action. Education is critical for trustees to see the connection between stepping up and doing advocacy for their organization—‘If I don’t do this, something bad will happen to my hospital.’”

Linda Janczak, President and CEO of Thompson Health in Canandaigua concurs about the importance of trustee education—both to learn about current issues and to be prepared for the future.

“Let’s face it, CEOs will come and go, but community representation is constant,” said Ms. Janczak. “It’s critical that we cultivate informed trustees so that they can pass the torch to keep the focus on community representation and being advocates for the community’s health care system.”

The Advocacy Challenge: The Trustee Perspective

When a person volunteers to sit on a hospital or health system board, he or she does not necessarily think about advocacy. However, these volunteers soon discover that advocacy with elected representatives is a given for trustees who are part of New York State’s health care system.

Trustees understand that they have a responsibility to the community. However, they may not understand their unique role as volunteers and the influence this can have on decision makers. Most likely, their role in advocacy is not something they had thought about until their board orientation, their participation in board meetings, or until they are exposed to information or education from Healthcare Trustees of New York State (HTNYS), American Hospital Association (AHA), or other associations.

Many trustees are not comfortable with the advocacy role and see it simply as “lobbying”—with all the negative connotations associated with lobbying. However, one trustee pointed out that “good lobbyists” bring valuable information to elected officials, and trustees bring “value-added insight” to legislators.

As trustees consider their role in advocacy, they often note that it is important to meet with legislators and their staff, bring them into the hospital, and build personal relationships with them. Trustees agree that underlying all advocacy initiatives is building and strengthening relationships.

The Changing Definition of Advocacy

At its recent meeting, the HTNYS Advocacy Committee examined trustee advocacy—what it is today and how it can be enhanced to be more effective tomorrow.

Advocacy Committee members agreed that advocacy is more than lobbying—it involves building ongoing relationships, not just seeking out legislators when you need or want something. They also agreed that advocacy goes beyond legislative advocacy and extends to taking an active role in community advocacy and education.

Advocacy Committee members asked themselves: Why do we focus only on elected representatives? What about the businesses in our community? What about the community we serve?

They concluded that trustees are the linchpin to creating real grassroots networks and educating the community through one-on-one conversations and through presentations before local organizations like the Kiwanis and Rotary. Committee members said that to be successful, trustees need to talk with community members and edu-

Advocacy:

The act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy; active support

—*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, 2000.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS TOPIC, CONTACT

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cate them about health care trends and challenges and what their local hospitals are doing on their behalf.

It is important that dialogues with community members go beyond discussion about what is happening at the hospital and that community members are asked for their opinions and perspectives. As one trustee committee member noted, “Let’s not forget those we serve.”

Expanding and Strengthening Your Role as an Advocate

Today, health care providers face unprecedented challenges to their tax-exempt status, their financial aid and charity care policies, and their quality improvement efforts. In this environment, it is essential that hospitals and their trustees—their community representatives—reach out and strengthen their relationships with community members, opinion leaders, and elected officials. It is imperative that trustees be part of that community outreach and relationship building.

Statewide and national associations are creating initiatives and tools to provide assistance and resources for hospitals and health systems as they identify organized ways to bolster community relationships. AHA, HANYS, and HTNYS, through their Community Connections partnership, are encouraging hospitals and health care providers to actively engage community members in conversations and dialogue about hospitals, local health care, health care reform, and other issues of importance at the local level. One objective of this and the HANYS/HTNYS Healthy Conversations initiative is to reaffirm hospitals’ rightful place as a vital and valued community resource; one of the best ways for this to occur is by talking with your community.

What can trustees do to advance the community advocacy imperative? First, you should talk to your CEO and find out how your organization is engaging the community and ask about the role you can play. You can also:

- talk about your local hospital and health care in general with family, friends, and colleagues—note the many contributions that your organization makes to the health, economy, and quality of life of your community;
- ask to do a short presentation about your hospital that involves active listening at a meeting of one of the clubs or organizations to which you belong;
- make sure that you “talk up” the hospital and solicit opinions about what is happening in health care at the local level, at meetings, parties, and other events that you attend; and
- consider conducting a formal “Healthy Conversation” with your community using the questions developed by AHA and HANYS.

Never before has the role of advocacy—particularly community advocacy—been so important to the long-term future and survival of hospitals in our communities. As a trustee, we encourage you to step up and begin the first of continuous dialogues with your community about the many contributions made by hospitals and health care providers in your area and the state and national challenges facing our health care system. Just as importantly, listen to what members of your community have to say, share their perspectives in your boardroom, and find ways to respond and maintain an ongoing dialogue with those you serve.

See the back page for information on HTNYS’ Trustee Ambassador program.

Trustee advocacy
can range from
rallying at the Capitol
to talking up
your local hospital
at community meetings.





HTNYS

Trustee Ambassador Program (TAP)

Would you and your fellow board members like to become more involved in advocacy?

The HTNYS' Trustee Ambassador Program (TAP) is an opportunity for trustees to learn about the importance of advocacy and to become connected to the growing army of Trustee Ambassadors across the state.

Whether it is educating local community members or local editorial boards about hospital contributions to the region's economic health and quality of life or actively participating in legislative visits, health care trustees play a pivotal role as advocates for their institutions. TAP helps governing boards and individual trustees learn more about advocacy so that they can become more actively involved. Through TAP, trustees are invited to become ambassadors for advocacy and join the growing army of health care advocates.

**Call HTNYS at 800-360-7211 today
to schedule a TAP visit for your board.**

HTNYS staff will provide customized information, advocacy tools, and resources to help your governing board members better work with their organizations' leaders to initiate strategic advocacy efforts at the local, state, and national levels.