

NASW-NC Advocacy Boot Camp

March 19, 2010

By: Anne Loy, NCSSWA Past President

Several board members attended the training on March 19th offered by NASW. It was advertised as an "Advocacy Boot Camp" and we learned a lot! NASW sponsored this training day for social workers in all areas of practice.

Jack Register routinely reminded us: "If we don't speak for social workers, others will."

The focus of the day was on learning how to be an advocate for your profession. Repeatedly we heard that *every individual has the ability to impact legislation*. This May, the "short session" begins in the Legislation. During this session, bills that relate to the budget and those that did not pass in last year's long session will come back for work. With this being a year for election, it should be interesting. NC must have a balanced budget so cuts will be made. We need to be vocal about our profession. We need to concentrate on preserving jobs and services and ensuring that positions do not change.

The most important thing to know and remember is that we have to build relationships with our legislators and the local people who make decisions (County Commissioners, School Board members, etc.). We have to tell them stories about our clients and children that they will remember. We have to make social work real to them.

NC has a citizens' legislature—the only requirements to run for an office is that you be 25 years old. Most legislators are no more knowledgeable about matters than anyone else and they depend upon their constituents to advise them in matters of importance. We must be their resource about legislation related to school social work.

We had a panel presentation that emphasized how (and how not) to be a strong advocate and how to build a relationship with your legislator. Panel members included:

Rep. Jennifer Weiss (Wake) and co-chair of the Finance Committee; Sen. Josh Stein (Wake); Laura Devivo, Senior Policy Advisor Staff to Speaker Joe Hackney; Alex Miller, MSW lobbyist and organizer of the boot Camp (also serving on Rep. Rick Glazier); Jennifer Mahan, Director of Policy with the Mental Health Association; and Rob Thompson, Executive Director of the Covenant with NC's

Children. Each panel member responded to questions about "what works" and how you get legislators to listen.

To summarize their remarks:

Start at your local level—start with your legislators in your district. Find out which committees they serve on and how they have voted. Do some research first and see how they have voted on various matters. If you have agreed with their votes and feel they have supported your own areas of interests, let them know by thanking them for their action. Remember, this is an election year. Talk to the people before they get elected and get to know them and their platform and causes. If you really agree with their political stance—help with their campaign. **Make personal contact**—call them for an appointment. Ask them if they have time to meet with you and hear your concerns. Ask for 10 minutes. The best time for this is NOW—before the session starts when most legislators are still in their home districts. Speak from the heart. Have your ideas and thoughts organized. Have the correct information and present it in a concise manner. Be brief and be respectful. Let them know that you have a personal stake in the outcome of a bill. Tell them that you would like to be their resource person about school social work. Make it personal. Write them a personal thank you note to follow up your visit.

After your personal contact, send **them written information that summarizes what you told them**. Be able to have 4-5 sentences that cover your concern. This should include your name, your county, your background experience, what the problem (bill) is and why it is important, and what you think the solution should be. Again, be concise. Give them a story that demonstrates your point of concern. Be professional about your concerns and don't make it personal. Never threaten not to vote for them.

Research indicates that it takes at least seven times to see and talk with someone before you remember who they are—that's why you get so many mailings when people are running for an office! It will take just as many contacts from you to be known to your legislator.

Be politically engaged. Find out about their staff and become knowledgeable about the bills coming up. Use the website: www.ncleg.net and notice who votes for what. If you approve of someone's vote, let them know—they rarely hear positive comments and good things. Remember that some victories are small and incremental—compromises are often necessary to pass legislation and sometimes getting a little of what you want is all you can. Sometimes, it takes small steps in legislation to get the big thing you want. Sen. Stein and Rep. Weiss both indicated that sometimes not getting totally defeated is all you can get and you come back

with another small step next time. It is not helpful to have the "all or nothing" attitude when it comes to legislation.

In closing, we were asked to develop a Personal Action Plan that would guide our advocacy work and contact with legislative/political figures. Here are the things to consider:

1. What is your **zone of influence**—make a list of your city, county, school board members, representatives, senators, etc. and identify their contact information, including their phone numbers, email addresses, and mailing addresses.
2. What is your **scope of action**—what you intend to do: Write letters? Send emails? Make visits? Write letters to the local paper's editors? Have a house party?
3. What is your **time frame**—one month? Three months? Commit to the idea of repetition in your contacts.
4. Find **someone to be accountable to**—an organization or an individual you can communicate and tell them what you have done.
5. **Do it**. Don't be an "arm chair activist".
6. **Follow up with communication**—send thank you notes and recognize what your legislators are doing. Be appreciative. Build a relationship. Let them know that you can be a resource for them.

Again-use the website: www.ncleg.net and investigate who your people are and make that contact.

Anne Loy