

EDITORIAL BOARD MEETINGS

An editorial meeting—whether it is with an editorial board or a single editorial writer—is a unique opportunity for advocates to present their viewpoints on issues to the press and broadcast media. Unlike hard news, editorials present opinions. Advocates can take advantage of editorial meetings to turn the media's attention to the urgent need of America's medically underserved.

Editorials often follow news events. Your opportunity to promote editorial coverage will be greatly enhanced by the amount of hard news coverage you have received in the community. As advocates, you have the opportunity to present the "big picture" of health care in crisis in editorial presentations.

Editorials can achieve several goals; educating the public and candidates on the issues, calling the media's attention to the issue and raising the legitimacy and visibility of your activities. This type of meeting gives health centers a chance to present their views directly to the editors of the paper, to discuss unfair articles and editorials, or to urge the paper to take a particular editorial position. A meeting may not get a favorable editorial but it increases the likelihood that your perspective will at least be mentioned.

Goals

- Help shape the public policy debate on children's issues.
- Increase the visibility and credibility of health center issues with the media.
- Give local leaders increased visibility with the media.
- Have the media take editorial positions on health center issues.
- Develop a positive relationship with media leaders, encouraging increased coverage of children's issues.

Steps to Take

- Write the editorial page editor requesting an editorial board meeting. Explain what you want to talk about, whom you might bring with you, why the issue is timely and important to the community. Suggest that he may want to invite other editors and reporters to attend. Follow up a few days later with a telephone call.
- Before you meet with the editorial board, make sure you know what the paper has written on your subject in the past. This is part of good preparation and common courtesy. If you are going to ask a newspaper to highlight a particular issue, know what the paper has already said about it. It will help you tailor your case to the special interests of your target audience, the editorial board.
- Keep files on what your local papers have written on issues of importance to them. Such a filing system can be very useful in preparing for meetings with representatives of the papers. While you may have kept a file on your issues, you may not be aware of what position the paper has taken on others, for example, school bonds, gun control or college loans. A local coalition can really help fill in the void, with each group getting up to speed on the issues that they cover. Your position will be greatly enhanced if you learn each others' issues, i.e., if you let the pediatricians speak up for schools and the teachers talk about health care. So a good briefing on the four key

tenets of the Coalition's agenda—health, education, safety and security as they relate to the paper's past positions—is a very good idea.

- It is especially important to read the paper on the day of your meeting. If an article about your issue or your organization has appeared in the paper that day, people on the editorial board will expect you to have read it.
- You should prepare one-page fact sheets in support of your position and bring enough copies for everyone in the meeting. Also bring copies of any editorial memoranda your organization has written on the issue and the names and numbers of people who can be contacted for more information.
- You might want to bring other experts with you to the meeting, but a good general rule is the smaller the group, the better. Some advise that one person is often the best solution for presenting the necessary information and answer most questions from the editorial staff. You can always get back to the board with more information or answers that you did not have at the meeting.
- Some advocates like to bring people who can increase the credibility and importance of their message, such as prominent citizens from the community. You can also help your case by bringing someone who would not normally be considered an ally. For example, a liberal group can imply widespread support for its position by including a prominent conservative in its delegation.
- A typical editorial board meeting will start with your opportunity to "state your case." This opening statement should be limited to a few minutes. It should summarize your organization's position on the issue, the evidence that supports this position, the anticipated criticisms of your opposition and appropriate responses to those criticisms.
- Once you have stated your case, you can expect questions from the editorial board. Not all of the questions will seem friendly, even if the board is predisposed to agree with you. This is because editorial boards must consider the counter arguments they will receive from their readers. Board members will often want to test the validity of your position by playing the role of devil's advocate.
- It is crucial to anticipate the most common criticisms of your position ahead of time and be prepared to defend against them. If you can't adequately defend your opinions, how can the newspaper be expected to defend them?
- It is always useful to be prepared with the names and phone numbers of those critics with whose comments you are willing to live. For example, if you inventory in your mind all those groups that are likely to attack your position, identify the ones you find easiest to assault. In other words, be prepared to give ground but not to arm your enemies. Give the paper the names of a noted fiscal conservative, for example, who would say the money is simply not there and the people aren't willing to have their taxes raised, even to support health care programs. This kind of criticism you can live with—and even rebut, to some extent. But you don't need to give them the names of people who will undermine your credibility. And, left to their own devices, they will simply go through their source list—so better you should stack the deck against yourself than trust to random selection.

- Try a practice session with one person playing this role, reading from questions prepared in advance on 3 x 5 cards. If possible, use a home video recorder to tape the session. Let the presenter critique his/her own performance.
- If the newspaper decides not to do an editorial, or to take an editorial stance that is contrary to your position, suggest that it print an op-ed piece or a letter from your organization. You do not want to offer such an alternative unless you are sure it won't run an editorial. But, under these circumstances, being prepared with this option can help salvage the situation.
- Always remember that when you meet with an editorial board, or any staff of any newspaper, you are meeting on its turf. The newspaper is extending you a courtesy by listening to and considering your point of view. Return the courtesy by respecting the editorial board's opinions, positions and constraints.
- If the editors decide not to agree with you, make it clear that agreement on any particular issue is not a prerequisite for maintaining an ongoing relationship of mutual respect. Remember, in any type of lobbying, there is no such thing as permanent friends or permanent enemies.

Timeline

- Two weeks before the meeting have a practice session with your spokespersons.
- In an election year, arrange for meetings four to six weeks before the primary and general elections.

Generally Speaking...

- Don't assume reporters know what you mean. Avoid jargon, initials and acronyms. If you think a reporter is not following your point, state it a different way. * Have a good attitude. Be patient.
- Don't confuse style with substance. A consistent message is more important than a catchy new sound bite.
- Anticipate questions, especially the hard ones.
- If you are not the best person to be interviewed on a certain topic, put the reporter in touch with that person.
- If you want to win your point, appeal to the public's self interest.
- Know the facts: Never lie. Never guess, and never think less of yourself if you don't know the answer. Tell the reporter you will get back with the answer - and always do so. If you realize you gave a reporter misinformation, call immediately to set the record straight.
- Share information with reporters as you receive material from government agencies, the national office or other sources. Put your name and phone number on any information you give to reporters. .
- Bring materials for everyone who attends.
- Send a thank-you note afterward, and continue to press for an editorial. Keep the editorial staff apprised of relevant new developments.

SAMPLE EDITORIAL BOARD REQUEST LETTER

TO: _____, Editor
FAX: 212-416-2658
FROM: _____, National Association of Community Health Centers
RE: Editorial Board Meeting request
DATE:

The week of August 20-26, 2000 has been designated National Community Health Center Week. In preparation for this week, we at the _____ Community Health Center would welcome the opportunity to come in and meet with members of your editorial board to discuss issues currently facing community health centers and the patients they serve around the country.

Community, Migrant and Homeless Health Centers are a critical safety-net provider in furnishing primary and preventative health care for members of their community, regardless of their ability to pay. In addition, health centers also focus efforts on specific community problems and provide needed services such as substance abuse programs, translations services, dental care, child immunization, smoking cessation, eldercare or social work services.

On the state level, New York has 43 health centers operating at 78 sites across the state. More than 20% of New York's medically underserved population (Medicaid recipients, uninsured and other hard-to-serve populations) are cared for at community health centers. Forty-two percent of New York's health center patients are under the age of 19. In New York, health centers are an important provider of care to a significant number of people--serving more than 800,000 patients each year.

<Include some local data>

Last year,, the *Boston Globe* wrote an editorial highlighting the biggest policy challenges currently facing health centers – appropriations from Congress and BBA Reform/Medicaid payment system, “The 981 community health centers in the United States are oases of medical care for poor people whose needs might otherwise be ignored by the medical system. They should not be decimated by shortsighted cuts contained in the Balanced Budget Act but should be sustained by infusions of additional support.”

We hope that members of the <name of paper> Editorial Board will meet with us prior to August 20 and then consider covering our activities during Community Health center Week in the newspaper. Such coverage would go a long way towards helping health centers serve people who face barriers to care and whose unmet health needs represent a huge and growing cost to the nation.

For your information, I have attached some brief information about community health centers. I can be reached at _____ in at <phone number>, or by email at _____. We are looking forward to the opportunity to meet with the Board soon. Thank you.

SAMPLE EDITORIAL BOARD FOLLOW-UP LETTER

Dear :

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with our group last month. <Names of meeting attendees> and I very much value the coverage the <name of newspaper> has given to issues such as children's health, quality of care, welfare reform and Medicaid. We hope our discussion peaked your interest in the good work that the <your state or city> community health centers do.

While our discussion last month touched on numerous issues facing health centers both in <your state> and in the nation, I wanted to take this opportunity to reiterate our concern about the current funding crisis facing health centers today. As you know, health centers are located in medically under-served urban and rural areas all over the state. They are community owned and governed by a community Board of Directors. Health centers focus on quality preventative and primary care for families and patients of all ages. After 30 years of service, health centers have the special expertise in meeting the unique needs of the most vulnerable populations and are often the only source of non-hospital, community-based primary care for them.

Health centers are required by law to care for anyone who walks in -- regardless of their ability to pay. Not only have more patients coming through the doors of health centers during the last several years but more uninsured are relying on health centers for their care. In the past three years alone, the number of uninsured people seeking care at health centers has increased by more than one million nationally. At one <name of city> health center, <name of health center>, **revenue has decreased by __ percent while the number of uninsured patients has increased by __ percent.**

This financial squeeze has forced health centers to cut staff and services, delay capital improvements and expansions, shut down labs or close satellite and school-based locations. _____ Health Center has cut __ positions in the last three years including a pediatrician, a physician assistant, an internist, a health educator and a nurse. There is nothing else to cut. Investing in health centers is critical to the health and well-being of the more than ten million patients health centers serve every year nationwide. **Without a significant increase in funding to offset the costs of caring for the increasing numbers of uninsured Americans, a considerable number of health centers will be forced to close – leaving entire communities without accessible, affordable, quality care.** We are now working with Congress to secure \$150 million in additional funding for FY2001 that would allow health centers to provide care to an added one million low-income patients, including 350,000 uninsured.

Next week, I will send you a packet of information including various reports done on the effectiveness of community health centers. If you have any questions or need any other information, please don't hesitate to call me or any of the _____ area health centers. I also hope that you or a reporter you designate will be able to visit a health center soon. We would be happy to show you around our center and explain their work and individual situations. We hope you will consider writing something about the current funding crisis facing the health centers

Thanks again for your time.

Sincerely,