

# Dig Into Advocacy Toolboxes: Volunteers Make a Difference as Associations Influence Public Policies

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*by Dan Rode, MBA, FHFMA*

How is AHIMA representing your interests in the national arena—and how can you get involved? Like many associations, AHIMA works to promote members' perspectives on a national level and to find solutions to the industry's problems. This year, AHIMA is expanding the tools available for members who want to help. This article explains current advocacy efforts and new tools—and how you can get involved.

## Taking It to the States

AHIMA's policy and government relations team (P&GR) represents the Association to Congress, executive departments and agencies, standards groups, and other associations. In addition, AHIMA volunteers and professional staff represent the Association in discussions about a variety of national and international standards efforts and other activities.

Similarly, AHIMA's component state associations (CSAs) have advocacy activities of their own. For example, some CSAs engage professionals to promote their advocacy concerns. Many CSAs also have a volunteer oversight committee that spearheads volunteer advocacy efforts.

Local and national advocacy activities are connected. For instance, in recent years, AHIMA has worked to improve the information CSAs receive about legislative and regulatory activities in their state. The P&GR staff members closely monitor state legislative and regulation events related to HIM issues and keep the CSAs informed. Staff members also give CSAs advice on how they might conduct advocacy activities related to a specific situation.

## Plug in to Online Resources

Advocacy resources exist online, too. The Advocacy Liaison Community of Practice (CoP) was created to give state volunteers interested in advocacy access to information and resources. Community members also have the opportunity to discuss how their states should approach particular problems or issues. The community serves as a source of daily networking and training for advocacy liaisons.

In addition, as the process of scanning for state legislative and regulatory activity has become automated, liaisons have access to state-by-state information using a new Web-based tool, the NetScan State Legislative and Regulatory Tracking Tool. This new software that searches for HIM-related information key to each state is now available to CSA advocacy liaisons through a link in the CoP. Training will be offered at the Leadership Conference in July in Chicago and in October at the National Convention in Minneapolis, MN.

## Let Us Assist You

In addition to the CoP, other recently developed tools can make advocacy efforts more effective. Most notably, the Advocacy Assistant, an online toolbox available this summer at [www.ahima.org](http://www.ahima.org), explains what advocacy is, how the legislative process works, how to influence this process, how to meet with or write a letter to a legislative member, and other ways to assist in these efforts. It also features links to help users find legislation and their legislators.

In the future, contacting lawmakers will become even easier. An additional piece of software that will allow for direct e-mailing of comments related to an AHIMA effort or for contacting members of Congress is on the way. CapWiz will be available this summer as part of the Advocacy Assistant.

## Your Voice Matters

Tools like these are powerful, but they don't make a difference until they're used. No matter how large an advocacy budget an association might have, when it comes to promoting an advocacy issue, experts maintain that nothing is more effective than the power of individuals who contact—and, if possible, meet—their representatives. The advocacy tools described in this article can help AHIMA and its members “make the case” to a legislator as both HIM experts and as voters, but the first step—volunteering—is yours.

While the Association encourages and welcomes member involvement in national issues, participation is needed just as much on a state basis, especially by your local CSA. Get active in your CSA advocacy committees and task forces and use these tools on a local as well as national basis. Contact information for state volunteer leaders is listed in the back of each issue of the *Journal of AHIMA*. We'll continue to keep you informed about how the PG&R team is working toward the Association's advocacy goals.

## Association Advocacy 101

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Most association advocacy efforts are directed at legislation, regulation, or standards. Sometimes an association itself can also be a standards organization. Often, the rules that apply to the association's professional credentials also become standards. Some associations advocate their credentials becoming a state mandate for some employment.

In addition to government and standards activity, most associations also find themselves working with or advocating with other associations, either to develop some situation for their mutual benefit or to work together for their common good. So it's not unusual to see professional healthcare associations working with each other or with trade associations (for example, hospital or nursing home associations) for a common goal.

As associations grow larger, they often hire staff to assist in the advocacy process. Such representatives work with groups of volunteers to understand the issue and to arrive at the position or perspective the association would like to see occur with a particular piece of legislation, regulation, or standard.

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**Article citation:**

Rode, Dan. "Dig into Advocacy Toolboxes: Volunteers Make a Difference as Associations Influence Public Policies." *Journal of AHIMA* 74, no.7 (July/August 2003): 14,16.

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