

Election-Year Advocacy Agenda: A Three-pronged Effort for Promoting HIM at the National and Local Levels

Save to myBoK

by Dan Rode, MBA, FHFMA

Early last month AHIMA members met with members of Congress to discuss federal legislation that addresses HIM issues. AHIMA's 2008 Hill Day was the first event in the association's three-pronged advocacy effort to ensure the current 110th Congress and the upcoming 111th Congress are aware of the HIM profession and its issues. Congress will tackle an array of healthcare and informatics decisions that could help—or hinder—the nation's adoption and use of health information technology.

While Washington, DC, was the site of the first advocacy effort, the remaining two efforts will soon appear in a neighborhood near you.

AHIMA's Hill Day Advocacy Efforts

Approximately 170 HIM professionals from 36 states attended AHIMA's 2008 Hill Day, taking in more than 210 meetings with members of Congress or their staff. The previous day, members met with AHIMA policy and government relations staff for a briefing on the profession's key advocacy issues and a discussion on the specific issues to address in Hill visits.

Meetings with Congressional staff included a discussion of the HIM profession itself. Although Congressional members are often presented with IT issues and legislation, they are not as aware of HIM professionals and the role they play in healthcare and health IT. This year's HIM advocates reported that dialogue often provided new healthcare insights to their Congressional hosts.

In addition to discussing the profession, members also raised concerns with Medicare's Recovery Audit Contractor (RAC) program and requested support for legislation (HR 4105) initiated by Representative Lois Capps (D-CA). The Capps bill would place a moratorium on the RAC program for a year and require the Government Accountability Office to examine the program. The program initially was launched in three states; however, as the RAC program now expands to all states HIM professionals are concerned that problems in the pilot states have not been resolved.

AHIMA advocates also addressed legislation for the adoption of ICD-10-CM and ICD-10-PCS. They cited the mounting problems associated with the use of ICD-9-CM and the need for 2008 Medicare legislation to include language that would finally adopt the ICD-10 classifications and other standards that must be upgraded to permit implementation and use within the next few years.

Advocates urged their representatives to spur the Medicare-related Congressional committee members to adopt the necessary language and achieve passage by both houses of Congress. While the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is rumored to be initiating proposed regulation changes that would achieve the same end, AHIMA members argued that no additional time should be lost moving the healthcare industry toward actual ICD-10 use.

Attendees described the role of HIM in health IT and discussed the need for more HIM professionals in order to achieve nationwide implementation of standard electronic health records and health information exchange. The advocates thanked members of the House of Representatives for passing the 10,000 Trained by 2010 Act (HR 1467) in the first session and asked senators to pass similar language and appropriations before the end of the year.

High on the advocates' list was final passage of the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act, originally passed by the House in HR 493 and currently under consideration by a House and Senate conference committee as part of the deliberation for mental health parity legislation.

These four requests did not come close to all the information the HIM professionals wanted to convey to Congress, but most meetings were constrained by limited time. Not wanting to leave any stone unturned, AHIMA members left plenty of materials with Congressional staff to cover topics that could not be addressed during the visit.

They also made sure that members of Congress know that HIM professionals in their states and districts stand ready to discuss all these issues at any time and are prepared to provide members of Congress with the knowledge and perspective on how HIM and health IT-related legislation might affect their constituents.

Taking HIM to the Local Level

Hill Day is a wonderful way to meet other HIM professionals from across the country and join in an advocacy event in the halls of Congress. But even after a full day of meetings, Hill Day participants met with fewer than half the members of Congress. To ensure that all members of Congress are contacted, AHIMA is initiating a second wave of advocacy visits—a visit to “Congress in Your Neighborhood.”

Members of Congress spend considerable time in their districts or states, and all members maintain one or more offices accessible to their constituents back home. AHIMA is making the materials from the Hill Day meetings available to members and component state associations to assist individuals or groups in visiting their senators and representatives or their staff in their local offices. The materials also provide information on how to set up an appointment.

Key members of the House and Senate who were not visited in Washington, DC, will be especially targeted. These include members and leaders of Congressional committees that oversee HIM or healthcare-related legislation. In this way the HIM message can be heard by the entire Congress. Members will be seeing more on the “Congress in Your Neighborhood” program shortly, and we hope you will consider either spearheading or joining in a visit.

A personal visit by a constituent is one of the best ways to convey support and interest to a member of Congress. It shows that the constituent is willing to take valuable time to ensure the representative understands and supports an issue. It also means that this same constituent or group will be watching to see that the representative takes up their cause or at least is willing to discuss the cause and why he or she cannot support it.

Election-Year Opportunities

This is also an election year for all members of the House of Representatives and one-third of the senators. A number of members are retiring, and others could be defeated in the upcoming elections. So how do we ensure that both new and returning members in the 111th Congress are aware of the HIM profession and our issues?

Early this summer AHIMA will initiate a third advocacy opportunity directed at nominated candidates for Congress. The campaign has three goals:

- Educate candidates on the HIM issues behind the major campaign issues for 2008
- Reserve an opportunity to meet or communicate with the staff of the winning candidates after the election (to then take up more detailed HIM issues that should be addressed)
- Ensure that the new members of Congress and their staff know they can turn to AHIMA members, state HIM associations, and the AHIMA national office if they have questions or concerns in the arena of HIM or health IT

Few nonincumbent candidates have the time to pay attention to the kinds of issues that are of concern to HIM professionals, nor do campaigns have time for the education that might heighten their attention. But candidates do need votes, and they will agree to meet after their successful campaign. This is an opportunity to establish early relationships with the 111th Congress, and we hope you will consider joining or leading an effort in your state.

This year’s election provides many chances for you to get involved in the election process—not only to further the causes of the HIM community, but other issues as well.

AHIMA would like to thank all who participated in this year’s Hill Day, a state HIM hill day, or one of the many opportunities to change healthcare for the better.

Ready to Get Involved?

Materials prepared for Hill Day are available online in the State Leaders and HOD Community of Practice at www.ahima.org. Individuals and component state associations can use the materials in visits to senators, representatives, and staff at their local offices. The materials also provide information on how to set up an appointment.

In addition, the Advocacy Assistant is always ready to provide support. Log on to this Web-based tool kit at www.ahima.org/dc (look for the “Advocacy Assistant” link at the left). The Advocacy Assistant describes advocacy and advocacy elements and provides resources and links to helpful information, such as names and contact information for federal and state officials.

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