

Record-setting Hill Day: AHIMA Members Spread the HIM Word in Washington

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by Dan Rode, MBA, FHFMA

On March 15, 141 AHIMA members fanned out across Capitol Hill to meet with Congress members or their staff for Hill Day. Representatives from 31 states and the District of Columbia made this Hill Day AHIMA's largest advocacy event ever.

Events began the preceding day with a two-hour seminar on AHIMA's key advocacy issues. AHIMA staff provided in-depth information about the association's ICD-10 classification adoption campaign and consistency of coding efforts.

Members were also briefed on the need for legislation prohibiting discrimination in the use of personal health information. Members were advised that Congressional staff might have questions about the HIPAA privacy regulations, as some Hill staff have received complaints regarding the HIPAA privacy law. As health IT is a major focus of Congress, members also prepared to cover various e-HIM® topics that might arise in their Congressional visits, including e-HIM functions and the HIM profession.

Members were given copies of the AHIMA and American Medical Informatics Association work force summit report "Building the Work Force for Health Information Transformation." The report will spearhead joint 2006-2007 advocacy efforts in recruitment and financial support for health information and informatics education.

Introducing Congress to HIM

Members began Hill Day with a breakfast briefing, where they received additional reference materials as well as materials to be handed out to the various Congress members and their staff. Some members and state associations added local material to these packets.

AHIMA staff outlined some how-tos of Congressional visits as well as the general tone and expectations for the visit. Members were reminded that they were the health information experts and were visiting their representatives to provide education and a point of reference for Congress's future questions and health information legislation.

Wearing "e-HIM Advocate" buttons, AHIMA members then spent the day visiting with Congressional members and their staff. Many members established new communication channels, promising additional information when inquiries could not be answered at the moment. Several members also took the opportunity to attend Congressional hearings that were held that day and the next, including one on personal health records.

The day ended with a reception in the House Rayburn building sponsored by Siemens Medical Solutions. Congressional staff from many of the offices attended the reception, along with other AHIMA visitors. Members shared their experiences, noting a few frustrations and many excellent encounters that will advance the e-HIM agenda. From these conversations and subsequent comments on follow-up forms several things were clear:

- First-time attendees who were initially anxious about meeting with senators, representatives, or staff quickly found that the materials and their own expertise provided most of the information needed to respond to questions.
- Some Congressional members and staff were not familiar with the HIM profession and its role in healthcare. Once the profession was explained, they were full of questions. Members were able to answer questions and provide examples that could be easily understood. Through these discussions several Congressional members indicated a desire to support AHIMA positions, and members were urged to continue communication on these issues.
- Most members who attended would do so again, and several indicated a desire to see similar Hill Days initiated in their states.

- Members appreciated the in-depth look at the e-HIM advocacy issues and indicated a desire to stay on top of these issues so they could continue to advocate with Congress.
- Many members planned to follow up via local offices with state representatives and senators who weren't contacted.

Meet in the District

AHIMA members who didn't attend Hill Day can advocate for HIM by contacting and meeting with their representatives in their state or district. Congress members try to visit their districts and states as often as possible, especially in an election year. Often these representatives hold town halls or other events. Meetings also can be arranged through their district offices. Materials used at Hill Day are available for download from AHIMA's Web site and Communities of Practice and can be presented in local meetings.

Members of Congress also can be asked to speak at state association meetings, which is an excellent way for state associations and members to get to know their representative better and present a clear picture of the HIM profession and its issues.

If you can't visit, write. By mid-March approximately 1,750 AHIMA members had written members of the House advocating for passage of legislation for adoption of ICD-10-CM and ICD-10-PCS. Most Congressional staff members note that it only takes 10 or 15 letters in any one member's in-basket to raise a flag that the member should investigate the issue. Like our AHIMA advocates on the Hill, once a dialogue is initiated, most HIM professionals can generally carry the conversation, whether the issue is electronic health records, confidentiality, consistency and uniformity of data, or other HIM issues.

If you have not taken the opportunity to write Congress on the issue of replacing ICD-9-CM with the contemporary ICD-10 versions, a letter template is available online in AHIMA's Advocacy Assistant ([\[...\]](#)). A second letter is also posted regarding legislation for genetic nondiscrimination, a part of AHIMA's concerns for nondiscrimination from any use of personal health information. The letter on the Web site can be sent as is or modified to fit individual purpose and style.

Bringing Issues to the Local Level

Nothing has a more profound effect on members of Congress than communication from constituents. Constituents can bring an issue to the local level--the senator's state or the representative's district. But constituents must also be sure that their representatives have the facts they need. Lawmakers need our expertise on issues such as classification systems, data nondiscrimination, and work force needs. AHIMA members have considerable power to make positive change. Make this opportunity count through a letter, call, or visit to a local office.

FORE to Lead RHIO Research

AHIMA's Foundation of Research and Education has been awarded a contract by the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology to develop best practices for state-level regional health information organizations (RHIOs). The work will bring together state-level RHIOs to gather information about their current policies and practices and to develop consensus on best practices and successful models. The work will also include a plan to disseminate the information and encourage adoption and coordination among state-level RHIOs. The work is currently under way, and final materials are expected in September

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