

Being a Legislative Advocate is as Easy as Three Clicks or a Phone Call

BY CALE BATTLES, LYNNE DAVIS & DEVIN MARTIN

In the most recent legislative session, the State Bar had great success when members took a few moments of their time to opine on issues important to them, especially those that potentially could affect the profession.

The State Bar of Wisconsin's government relations and grassroots coordinators explain how lawyers – as constituents – can reach out to lawmakers and the value of doing so.

A common critique of the legislative process is that lawmakers don't listen to outside voices, leading constituents to ask, "why should I even bother?" Certainly, the sentiment is understandable, and it can be difficult to advance a policy once a legislator determines their own strong position, especially if that issue is partisan in nature. However, many issues of interest to the State Bar of Wisconsin are not driven by a political party and are often relatively unknown problems or concerns outside the legal profession, leaving many elected officials open to dialogue about the topic at hand. For issues such as these, constituent outreach – also known as grassroots advocacy – can be the deciding factor as to whether a policy will be enacted.

In the most recent legislative session, the State Bar had great success when members took a few moments of their time to opine on issues important to them, especially those that potentially could affect the profession. These points of contact help educate legislators on issues vital to the practice of law and beyond. They are key opportunities for members to begin to establish a relationship with their lawmakers, not only for single issues but for a variety of ongoing issues within the legal profession.

A recent example of how member mobilization achieves success is the inclusion in the 2023-25 state budget of significant pay increases for assistant district attorneys (ADAs) and state public defenders (SPDs), along with a rate increase to \$100 per hour for

private bar attorneys (and an increase to \$50 per hour for travel time). The scale and scope of contacts made by members through grassroots efforts, in addition to direct lobbying by State Bar leadership and staff, was by far the most organized and purposeful campaign ever undertaken by the Advocacy and Access to Justice Department.



As with most legislative endeavors – even those with widespread bipartisan support – there can still be moments of angst by some lawmakers in response to the amount of spending requested. Only a few hours before voting on ADA and SPD pay and private bar rate increases, it was discovered that some of the most crucial allocations might potentially be scaled down or delayed by months or even longer. In those moments, the State Bar didn't have the time to push out legislative action alerts on a large scale but had only an hour or two to change a lawmaker's mind and then ask them to advocate with their legislative colleagues to reverse course. A few well-timed phone calls to legislators by members in or near key districts were necessary.

The members that answered that rapid call to action had previously developed a relationship with their lawmakers. They had attended a listening session (either in the elected official's district or at a public hearing held by Joint Finance Committee members), had made phone calls, sent a letter or email, perhaps used the State Bar's Advocacy Network, or simply had some previous interactions with the legislator or their

office staff on an issue before. These attorneys had established themselves as a consistent, knowledgeable resource to trust. And what ultimately mattered was that in that very moment, just before the important vote, a few key lawmakers heard from someone they knew who cared passionately about the issue. It isn't always successful, but, on this occasion, it was exactly what was needed – a straightforward message from familiar constituents who are leaders in the community.

The State Bar's Advocacy Network makes contacting your legislators as simple as possible. With just a bit of information and only a few minutes, members can submit comments on any of the State Bar's current advocacy campaigns or can compose their own message to lawmakers on any topic of importance. It can be as easy as three clicks of a mouse. This system is a great way to begin relationship building with your elected officials.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, members are encouraged to share personal stories and individual experiences with elected officials because these are always the most effective means of communicating important

issues. Of the Wisconsin Legislature's 132 members, only 11 are attorneys, so real-world examples from constituents are always helpful in getting messages to resonate with lawmakers who are not often exposed to the legal process. At the end of the day, the best advocate for the profession and justice system is you!

For more information on getting engaged, please review the State Bar's easy-to-follow Grassroots Advocacy toolkit on the Government Relations section of Wisbar (www.wisbar.org/GovRelations) for best practices for working and contacting legislators, or contact the State Bar's Grassroots Coordinator, Devin Martin, at dmartin@wisbar.org. **WL**

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STAY engaged to help move legislation forward. Learn about the State Bar's Government Relations program, access the Advocacy Network Grassroots Toolkit, and read the monthly e-newsletter, Rotunda Report.

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