AMCHP 2008 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

WE ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE:

What Washington Wants to Hear:
Explaining Your Programs to Congress

March 1st to 5th, 2008

CHRIS GOLDSON: Thank you, Joshua. Well, what I hope to do is to build on the great opening that Joshua and Julio have already given me. I agree with so much on what they said. And what I wanted to do is sort of flush it out a little bit and to sort of give you the perspective as a hill staffer about the environment in which you're going into.

There are two things that Joshua wanted me to talk about. What a staffer's role is in selling a program to their boss and the second thing is what can make a difference between a yes and a no or even a very strong maybe. Which is a plus, trust me. It's a trust.

So those are the two things Joshua basically gave me as my charge, and so I'm going to try to fill in around that and try to explain what my role is as a staffer.

First of all, the first thing I want to talk about is you guys are very important to my job. Advocates like Julio, like Josh, they're for and I hope by the time I get

through with this talk you'll understand why you guys are so important, it's so important to hear from the experts.

So before I get started, I want to talk about the atmosphere in which your hill visits are taking place. There's the larger atmosphere, there is support on the hill for maternal and child health issues like Julio was talking about. Last year we had SCHIP come up, and though it failed there are significant margins in both houses that voted that understood the issue and wanted to support the issue.

There were defeats, but these are large victories. He talked about the labor H bill that became law, the labor health appropriations bill with the four million dollar increase, well there was the house version, a previous version, the version that didn't get overridden provided I think eight to 10 billion dollar increase in health. And it came very close to passage, to override a couple votes.

So there is significant interest, concern about these issues on the hill, and support.

The other issue I was going to talk about is the next couple of weeks the house is going to take up PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan For Aids Relief. And this is global, not domestic, but it's important because some of the things that's going to be considered in the bill, comprehensive HIV AIDS prevention, infrastructure needs in developing countries. All these issues that are -- how to

better integrate the PEPFAR with maternal and child health nutrition programs, all these other things. All these things are going to be on member's minds the next couple of weeks all requiring some level of interest.

It's a continuing discussion all the time, everything, maternal and child health issues. I think on the larger level it shows there's an interest, there's an understanding, there's a desiring for the MCH block grant message to get through, to really get on to people's radar screens because congress has shown again and again that we're interested, we want to do something, it's hard to do something but there are people out there fighting and want to fight. We want to hear from you guys. We want to help. We want to help.

And that's the much larger message I want to get across to everyone, we want to help, we want people to come up and ask for help and to try to figure out the best way to do it.

On the much larger -- smaller scale as a staffer, March and I've worked for Congresswoman Gwen Moore for two and a half years, March is very hectic on the hill. It seems like every group comes in to visit, every group.

They're flying in, flying out of the door. It's like we didn't exist for I don't know, it's like staff doesn't exist the rest of the year, but March and April we have every person coming in. It's crazy. It really is.

And so it's always busy. Then the offices, each office is also preparing our appropriations requests, our earmarks. You know, we're -- we getting these requests from the district, from places, so we're doing that, we're trying to figure out what the members' priorities are, what does she want to see in appropriations bills like specific.

And then as a staffer, you start seeing all these deer colleagues, which are letters to specific programs that members are circulating, let's see, I've seen one for the emergency medical services program and trying to get their colleagues on it, so every program is it's flying around and so as a staff you're like, you're getting inundated by advocates, you're getting inundated by other staff members on the hill, your colleagues, and you have all this work that's coming on your desk.

And so I wanted to emphasize again why your role and why your job, why your visit is important to me. For your congress woman I handle defense, home land security, transportation, environment, intelligence, foreign affairs. Everything in those areas, every program -- I don't know all those programs, I mean, it's -- and it's funny in our environment it is Julio talked about being a robot, but…

But I think the best description for congressional staffer is we're a firefighter. We put out fires. We don't have time to think about how to prevent forest fires, we just have to put out the closest fire and keep working from there.

You're schedules are determined by what's going on on the floor, that takes up most of our days, members priorities and the new cycle, what's going on in the district. And so those influences, we're always putting out fires. So we don't have time to necessarily -- I don't have time to go and figure out every program in the defense department and how to improve it, does it need -- it's a good dream, but it's not going to happen. So where do you come in?

I say all that to say it's easy for messages to get lost. It's easy for programs to get lost. It's -- that's why it's important to carefully consider your pitch when you're coming into the office and to limit it to 10 to 12 minutes.

To be quite honest the MCH block grant isn't on a lot of people's radars. It's not. And it's very easy, if you're a health staffer, chances are health isn't the only issue you handle. You could handle defense like I do, you could handle environment and if next week, today's, this week's schedule says the defense appropriations bill is on the floor, that's what you're paying attention to, that's what you're trying to get on your boss's agenda, that's why you're trying to get up to speed, put up that fire first and then deal with what else is coming up and but they're meeting with you.

So it's really important to understand that I think to understand the framework of the people you're meeting with, what's or their mind, what's or their work, work agenda because I think it helps you to better pitch your program, to better understand how to make your message work and how to help them because that's the ultimately why you're at the value to me is why you help with all these issues. If I didn't have groups in any of my issues coming up to me and saying this is a problem, I will never understand that there's a problem.

I don't have time to understand every program. Unless you come up to me and say this is what the MCH block grant is and does, chances are I will never hear about the MCH program or when I hear about it it's because it's being cut, big time. That's the only -- it's a fire fighting environment. The only time you hear about most programs is when something bad's happening to them from a staffer perspective.

So that's why I think it's very important what you do is to educate the staff and help them to learn about the programs, you know, to emphasize, emphasize the education and the advocacy part because it helps put your program on the radar screen.

And that's what Josh was talking about in terms of relationship, that's what you're trying to build, that you are a source of information, you are a knowledgeable

source of information. I can't tell you how many times my boss just wants numbers.

How many up insured children are there in Milwaukee, what's the infant mortality rate, is it going up, is it going down, and as a staffer I'm flying around trying to figure out Google. And if I had your card as a state MCH person I could say, do you have this information.

It helps me do my job and it helps make your program make your message resonate even that much better. And so I want to talk to you, share a story about a good meeting that happened. It's a real story. My colleague who Julio has met with Judy, last week she had a meeting, and the only reason I even know about this meeting or I can share this, it's all secondhand is because it's a good meeting and she left that meeting with a desire to do something. And that's the point.

You know, your job is to raise the MCH block grant visibility and to help staffers understand why the program is important to their district, you know, that's your job. If the staffer can't leave the meeting with a better understanding why this program is important to the district, chances are it's not going to get to the higher levels like my immediate supervisor is the legislative director and then there's the chief of staff and then obviously there's a congress person, the boss.

If I can't leave a meeting with you and I can't understand why the program is important to the district, you know, for senators it's the whole state, it's hard to get the staffer to invest the time and resources in the limited time environment.

But here's the story. My colleague she met with folks from the Children's Hospital in our district last week. And I don't understand what the meeting was about, but they left her with basically they said there are -- there's a huge need for children's dental health but there are no real places for low-income families to turn to in the city.

And she left that meeting, I don't know what she said, what it did, but it sparked something, that fact understanding that that problem was there, and she's not a public health -- she has no MPH, she has no Ph.D. but she knows there's a problem now.

And what that did is and the only reason I know about it is because Friday we spent about half an hour in the staff room, none of us MPHs, none of us with health degrees, no really no understanding of public health, there's this big discussion in there because it's so disturbed her, the people who made the presentation, the fact, the issue it generated -- we spent about half an hour talking about dental health in children's dental health and what's the issue with dentists and hygienists and how do we get sealants and what are sealants and we spent a half hour talking about it, trying to bounce around ideas.

And then one of my former colleagues at AMCHP I happened to have her information, she works at children's dental health project I said I know somebody, they can help you, I don't know what you need, I know you're interested and I gave it to her and she called and she set up a meeting to come in and talk about it.

And that's -- I think that's a good example of a good meeting. It's not immediate, I don't think the people who left that meeting necessarily understood what happened after the meeting and that the kind of interest it generated to kind of spark it generated, but it did. And that's a good meeting. I think that's what an example of a good meeting is, is that you help inform someone approximate a problem and you serve as a resources as they try to figure out how do we try to help you, how do we try to help this get done. You know, your role is to provide me as the staffer, I think, with good quick district or state specific information and I think you need to present yourself at that resource.

I think that's the strong -- that's the strongest asset I think of the MCH block grant is all the information that you have available and you make that resources and the breadth of what you do.

So I just had a few -- and now she's armed. The purpose, my colleague is not going to meet with those associations and other groups to arm herself to make

the pitch to the boss. Because if I don't know enough about something, I'm not going to talk to the boss about it. She will question me to death. She really will. And so if I don't feel comfortable to ask the information, there's no way I'm going to even start that conversation.

So I had a few dos and don'ts about meetings and I've run into a lot of don'ts in the last couple of weeks.

I say a do is to start with a specific ask and to end your visit with that ask. It seems so intuitive but I've been there and I've been sitting there and I'm like what do you want from me. We're 15 minutes. What do you want. And how can I help you.

And it hurts. So start and end what you want. So whatever happens in the middle they actually know what you want.

I was, the other to, or this is the don't, actually. Don't try to explain everything the block grant does. I think, one, you can't in 15 minutes. You can't. Don't try to explain everything. I will tune out after the first five minutes. I will. Heights human nature. And we're all units.

What you should do, pick out relevant programs or projects that will appeal to that specific office, that specific member. If you know or someone says they have

a dental health insurance, well you talk about the block grant but you talk about what the MCH is doing around that issue area and you say there are a lot of other things, here's the information, it's at your hand, you can read it, you can look at it, if you have a question just give me a call. But don't feel pressured to talk about everything, in fact just pick out relevant programs.

You know, do you have a new fill in the blank program that you're rolling out in the next month, few months. Why, why are you rolling it out? What problem has been identified that it's intended to address and is that a problem in the member's district.

The other thing and I think Julio talked about this, too, is brag about what works. Success. We hear about problems. Successes get funded, too. Which is why community health centers is looked at as a success, so it gets funded. Talk about successful interventions that you have that will work but we need funding. If that's all you talk about in your meeting, MCH block grant these are successful programs that did this. That helped so many mothers, that is a more effective meeting than talking about performance measures, anything else that you can think of.