

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE



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Legislative Advocacy: How to Level the Playing Field

A respected veteran lobbyist once told me that the legislative process is the last bastion of face-to-face interaction. In a world of texting, Twitter and the latest social media platform, there is no substitute for having an in-person conversation with a legislator. While electronic communications certainly have their uses in legislative advocacy, the human touch has greater value, and is the one factor that can level the playing field for organizations that do not have access to a large political action committee.

Think about this: when your cell phone rings, are you more likely to answer if the call is from a friend, or from a name and number you do not recognize? The obvious answer is you will make time to talk to someone you know. In this column, we will discuss how you can be an advocate for IAFPD by developing a personal relationship with your legislator.

Your legislators *want* to know you. As a constituent you are important to them, arguably more important than any registered lobbyist at the Capitol. Lawmakers also want to know what is going on in their legislative district. Your experience and knowledge of the fire service can serve as a resource to your legislators on bills pertaining to fire protection districts and the fire service in general. You are in a unique position to help them understand fire service issues and their impact on his or her district.

With these facts in mind, think of ways that you can reach out to your representatives in the General Assembly. This can be as simple as requesting a meeting in their district office or your local coffee shop. Come prepared with

a few talking points, or call the meeting to inform them of a development in your district. Bring your business card or some written materials about your fire protection district if you have them. A meeting does not need to be lengthy; this is an introduction that you will build upon.

Other opportunities include inviting a legislator to tour your facilities, observe a training program, or giving them an opportunity to speak at a meeting. Like any relationship, the connection between your district and your legislators will require care and feeding. As your calendar takes shape, think about what could present an opening to interact with your representative or senator. Keep in mind that the period between May adjournment and the new session in January is the best time to reach your representative and senator in their district.

Legislators and their staff are sophisticated users of social media. Take a look at your legislators' social media accounts. Note what they share about themselves, issues they care about and their legislative priorities. Do your homework in advance of an in-person meeting to help guide and facilitate the conversation. Social media also provides a way to continue your interaction by sharing photos and content from a meeting or event.

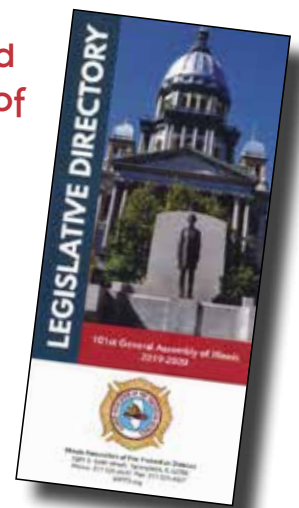
As we discussed at the recent annual meeting in Peoria, significant legislative issues are on the horizon. Voters throughout the state are pushing for property tax relief. Pension fund consolidation continues to be a hot topic as well, and with the passage of multiple tax increases as part of the fiscal year

2020 budget, legislators and Governor JB Pritzker are under increased pressure to deliver on these issues

The best way IAFPD can prepare for future discussions on pension consolidation and property taxes is for our members to begin building relationships with their legislators now.

When a problematic piece of legislation is introduced next spring, the effort you make now to develop that face-to-face relationship with your representative and senator will pay off. That does not mean they will necessarily vote with IAFPD on every issue, but yours will be a name they recognize. In Springfield, being recognized has great value. Please invest in your fire protection district and the Association by starting those relationships today. ■

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