



Helping Congress Understand

UNOS, others build relationships on Capitol Hill

BY WILLIAM G. LAWRENCE

Public communication and education are traditional responsibilities of UNOS, and those activities are also named as formal tasks in UNOS' OPTN contract.

A most important element of those efforts—and a constant challenge—is to keep the 535 members of Congress and their several thousand staff members familiar with the facts of donation and transplantation as well as the needs of the transplant community.

At any time, not just during regular election cycles, there are people coming and going from service on Capitol Hill. Inevitably, some members and staffers with whom UNOS has had a productive relationship depart, and the process of cultivating productive relationships with the new arrivals begins. That process may take years.

Only a few people ever arrive on Capitol Hill with an understanding of and interest in donation and transplantation. The issues are complex—medical, legal, social, always changing—and getting up to speed doesn't happen overnight. UNOS staff visit face-to-face, provide background documents, gather data on current issues, and respond to questions from legislators and their staffers.

The goals of those efforts are threefold: to establish cordial working relationships with Congress' key players in donation and transplantation, to maintain a flow of reliable information and data to them, and to assist, when requested, in the drafting of legislation that affects the transplant community.

PREPARING FOR THE ELECTION TURNOVER

As the recent November elections approached, political commentators predicted that there would be a larger-than-usual number of new members elected. It became important, then, for UNOS to make an early assessment of potential changes in its support base in Washington and to begin preliminary planning for the possible congressional turnover.

As anticipated, the majority party in the House of Representatives changed. That change inevitably and immediately accelerated the challenge of reaching out to the Hill far beyond what is normally the case after an election. We faced that same challenge in 1994 and in 2006, the most-recent elections that occasioned majority party changes in a congressional chamber.

When the majority party changes in either the House of Representatives or the Senate, there are many abrupt ramifications. A new Speaker of the House and/or Senate Majority Leader is elected from the new majority party, and the rest of the House and/or Senate leadership officers change as well.

In addition, all committee and subcommittee chairs in that chamber are promptly replaced by members of the new majority party, and nearly all of the most-influential staff members, such as counsels, staff directors and health assistants, change along with them. Some of the former majority staffers move to the relatively fewer minority staff slots, and others seek new employment off the Hill.

LET THE WORK BEGIN

After all those many changes are in place, the real work begins for UNOS and numerous other transplant organizations and advocates. First, we will convene one or more meetings of the Transplant Roundtable, an informal group that meets occasionally to discuss items of common legislative interest among the Roundtable's respective organizations.*

We will review the relationships that each organization may have with existing and new key members and staff, and identify the undoubtedly plentiful additional areas in which concerted liaison (i.e., relationship cultivation) activities are needed.

For years, UNOS has prepared and circulated a resource book, *Congressional Organ and Tissue Donation Awareness Caucus*, for the education of Hill offices, and will again this year update and reproduce the book for distribution. Other organizations contribute to the book, and also prepare backgrounders more specific to their own interests.

Getting an early start on all of that activity is essential if UNOS and other transplant organizations are to have effective communications in place by the time a much-changed legislative calendar begins to unfold in early 2011.

And, by that time, it will almost be time for the 2012 election cycle to begin. **U**

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*In addition to UNOS representation, the Transplant Roundtable, founded in 2001, is comprised of representatives from (in alphabetical order) American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases, American Association of Kidney Patients, American Association of Tissue Banks, American Liver Foundation, American Society of Pediatric Nephrology, American Society of Transplant Surgeons, American Society of Transplantation, Association of Organ Procurement Organizations, Eye Bank Association of America, NATCO—the Organization for Transplant Professionals, National Kidney Foundation, Renal Physicians Association and Transplant Recipients International Organization.