

The Doc at the Capitol: An Interview with Our Own Senator Ron Stollings



Shafic Sraj, MD, YPS Chair and Senator Ron Stollings, MD at the Greenbrier Resort, 2018 Healthcare Summit.

Senator Ron D. Stollings, MD, FACP is our State Senator representing WV District 07 that includes Boone, Lincoln, Logan, part of Mingo, and part of Wayne counties. He has been in this capacity since 2006. He is a practicing Internist in Madison, WV and was president of WVSMA in 2003. He has been a patient and public health advocate as well as a powerful defender of the practice of medicine since he has been in the Senate. Stollings has significant leadership roles including serving on the Finance, Education, Health and Human Resources (former Chairman), Economic Development, Labor, and Rules committees. On the national level, Dr. Stollings is the past co-chair of the Council

of State Governments Health Policy Committee. Additionally, he was one of three individuals recognized by the American Medical Association with the 2016 Nathan Davis Award. He was recognized for Outstanding Government Service. YPSgram had the opportunity of interviewing him during the Healthcare Summit.

YPS: Sen. Stollings, tell us a little bit about you and what made you decide to run for office?

Sen. Stollings: After I completed my residency at Bowman Gray School of Medicine at Wake Forest I returned to my hometown to practice medicine. At that time, I served on several committees and boards such as the University System of WV Board of Trustees, the Higher Education Policy Commission, the Corridor G Regional Economic Development Authority Board of Directors, and the Physicians Mutual Insurance Company. These opportunities to serve provided me better insight into key issues facing our state. I am honored to have the opportunity to run and serve in the State Senate.

YPS: What were the differences between what you expected and what you experienced once you were inside? What are some of the differences between what we see as outsiders and what really happens on the inside?

Sen. Stollings: I knew to start with that there would be a learning curve. What I did not realize was how much power is in the hand of the Committee Chairman. The deliberative process can be a very slow process to the point where a very simple and straightforward bill can take a long time to progress and can be opposed by many groups. The other thing that I learned was that bills could have unintended consequences.

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YPS: What would you tell the young West Virginia physician about the legislative process and its intersection with the practice of medicine?

Sen. Stollings: The intersection between legislation and the practice of medicine is solid and vital to physicians. Legislation affects our patients each day including access to quality healthcare, the cost of liability insurance, the scope of practice for physicians and what procedures physicians can or cannot do, and what pharmacists, nurses, physician assistants, psychologists, optometrists, and all other healthcare professionals can do with or without physician supervision.

YPS: How much impact do physicians, and physician groups have on the Capitol and what variables affect that impact?

Sen. Stollings: Physicians and physician groups such as the West Virginia State Medical Association are highly respected at the Capitol. Physicians and physician representatives frequently interact with legislators and have a significant impact on health-related legislation. But, remember, other healthcare professionals are also highly represented and have a significant impact on the legislative process. Physicians tend to be quiet when things are OK and show more interest when things are moving in the wrong direction. As such, early opportunities to change the course of things are missed, and physicians may then have to intervene when there is little time left in the process.

YPS: Where do you see healthcare in West Virginia heading to over the next decade and how can we change it in favor of the patient and the practice of medicine?

Sen. Stollings: There is going to be major healthcare reforms coming down the pike. I encourage the docs to be leading the process early. Let's be driver of reforms. I think there will be more integration of mental health and substance use disorder into primary care. Health outcomes are related to many more things than the system of care, but rather the economy, education level, behaviors, etc. and we as physicians will have to be tuned into and influence all these areas rather than just the office visit. In fact, the healthcare system only accounts for 20% of health outcomes.

YPS: What is your advice to the young physician?

Sen. Stollings: Young physicians must get involved in organized medicine early on. Get to know your local legislators, preferably when we are not in session, and let them know the issues and barriers that you and your patients face. Build a relationship. Be their trusted source early on so that when a matter comes up, they come to you first for an opinion. Support the legislators who represent your views on health care, and contribute to their campaigns in order to keep your voice heard when it matters most. Certainly, the voice of medicine and the input of physicians serving in the Legislature helps to produce better health policy.

YPS: Senator Stollings, Thank you for your insight and good luck during the next election cycle.

Sen. Stollings: Thank you.

Senator Ron Stollings, MD is running for reelection this coming November. WVSMA and YPS proudly support his campaign for reelection.