**Bringing Brain Injury Experience to Local and National Legislators**

By Catherine Mello

The idea of communicating with legislators is intimidating for many people. Without feedback from their constituents (the people who live in the district or state that they represent and vote for or against them in the next election) legislators may not be fully informed of the needs or concerns of the communities that they represent. Having the opportunity to meet people who have been impacted by brain injury gives a face and a story to discussion about policy on both the State and Federal level. Anyone can advocate for an issue that is important to them. This article will describe some approaches that will make it easier for people with brain injury and their supporters to start engaging with legislators.

Legislators and their staff typically know some information about a wide range of topics. Exactly how well they understand brain injury and potential policy implications related to brain injury will vary person to person. With over 2.87 million hospitalizations, emergency department visits and deaths due to traumatic brain injury estimated by the Centers for Disease Control in 2015 nationwide and 45,000 hospitalizations, emergency department visits, and deaths due to traumatic brain injury estimated in Maryland the same year, chances are that the legislator or staffer has some experience with a person in their life or themselves experiencing a brain injury. For example, Congressman Dutch Ruppersberger sustained a traumatic brain injury in a motor vehicle accident when he was in his 20s. He understands first-hand what it is like to experience challenges after a brain injury and the process of rehabilitation and recovery. You are an expert on your experiences and can provide both your personal story and some general information about brain injury especially if the legislator or staff is not very familiar with the issues that concern you. The Brain Injury Association of Maryland can assist you with finding materials to share with legislators related to specific topics. It is always a good idea to bring a brain injury fact sheet like [this one](https://www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/get_the_facts.html) from Centers for Disease Control.

To start, how do you know who represents you? Maryland has 2 United States Senators, [Chris Van Hollen](https://www.vanhollen.senate.gov/about) and [Ben Cardin](https://www.cardin.senate.gov/about) who represent Marylanders in the US Congress. Maryland has 8 US Representatives in the House of Representatives: [Andy Harris](https://harris.house.gov/about), [Dutch Ruppersberger](https://ruppersberger.house.gov/about-dutch/full-biography), [John Sarbanes](https://sarbanes.house.gov/about/biography), [Anthony Brown](https://anthonybrown.house.gov/about/), [Steny Hoyer](https://hoyer.house.gov/about), [David Trone](https://trone.house.gov/about), and [Jamie Raskin](https://raskin.house.gov/about). The seat formerly held by Elijah Cummings is vacant until a special election is held on April 28th 2020. The Maryland General Assembly has [47 Senators](https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/05sen/html/senal.html) and [141 Delegates](https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/06hse/html/hseal.html). To find out who represents you and how to contact them, click [here](https://maryland.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=177afa87a67746a4ac5496b2d0897fb7).

Most advocates agree that having an in-person meeting is the most effective way to share your story and concerns with legislators. Planning ahead can help you to stay organized and make the most of the visit. You will need to call or email your legislator’s office to schedule a meeting with them or their staff. Meetings can be scheduled in the legislator’s office in DC or Annapolis or at their office in their home district. When you call, let them know that you are a constituent and that you would like to set up a meeting.

Legislators and staff often have limited time, especially if the legislature is in session, so be prepared to share your concerns and ask for what you want in a 5-10 minute conversation. This can be challenging if you have impairments in executive function and or speech after a brain injury. Meetings may be held in noisy environments, like hallways, or waiting areas that can be overstimulating for people with sensory issues. Request to meet in a quiet space, if possible. Consider writing out the information that you want to share before the meeting and then reading it during your meeting to help you keep your thoughts organized. You should explain to the legislator or staff why you needed to do this.

Here is suggestion for structuring your talking points:

1. Share a little about how your brain injury had changed your life or your family’s lives
2. Share a personal experience or story that illustrates your concern
3. Share your concerns and request
4. Thank the legislator or staff for meeting with you

Additional Tips for the visit day

1. Keep your cool during your meeting. If you think that this will be difficult, come prepared with strategies or support to help you calm down if you become frustrated or overwhelmed.
2. Leave the legislator or staff with your contact information
3. Take the business card of the person(s) with whom you met
4. Consider leaving a copy for the notes that your prepared for the meeting, a brain injury fact sheet, and additional (brief) information that supports your request.

Consider sending a follow up email or letter within a week of the visit thanking the staff and legislator again for meeting with you. You can also plan to follow up with the legislator’s staff in the following weeks about whether they have taken any action on your request and ask if they have any additional questions for you. If you continue to make visits and contacts, you can build a relationship with your legislators over months or years of interaction. For example, Laurie Elinoff, who has been an involved advocate and TBI Advisory Board for years, is greeted by name when she enters the office of her representatives in the Maryland General Assembly.