

American Society of Addiction Medicine Advocacy Guide



ASAM American Society of
Addiction Medicine

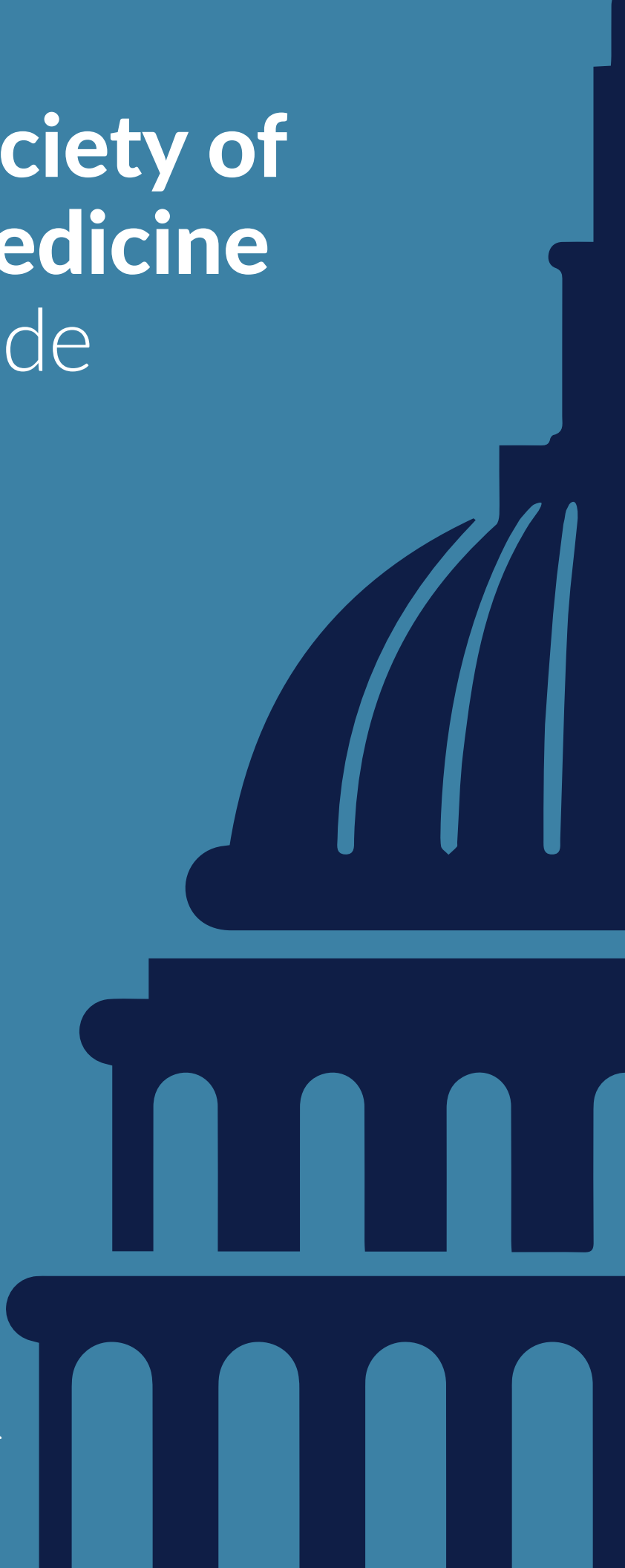


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AN INTRODUCTION TO ADVOCACY

Policy decisions made in Washington, D.C. and state capitols have real-world impact on the availability, accessibility, and quality of addiction care. That's why it's vital for ASAM members like you to advocate for evidence-based and effective policies impacting the field of addiction medicine.

For purposes of this guide, **“advocacy”** is broadly defined to *involve an individual or a group of individuals expressing an opinion about a public policy issue*. Advocacy can take a variety of different forms (e.g., public education campaigns, op-eds, or policy research).

“Lobbying,” on the other hand, is a specific subset of advocacy. While definitions can vary under federal and state laws and regulations, **“lobbying”** generally means *attempting to influence specific legislation or specific decisions of government officials* (e.g., sending a letter to a legislator that refers to specific legislation and reflects a view on such legislation).

Though advocacy can initially seem intimidating, the truth is that your medical expertise and personal experience are your most important and valuable tools to be an effective advocate. Helpful tips, tricks, and best practices for advocacy are included in this ASAM Advocacy Guide. While many portions of this guide focus on federal advocacy, they often translate well to state advocacy.

ASAM staff and resources are also a great starting point. Before you dive any further into this guide, we recommend you start with the three following suggestions:



Subscribe to The ASAM Advocate

The ASAM Advocate is your source for timely, useful news briefings of top stories in addiction policy, as well as ASAM developments related to national and state addiction medicine advocacy. You can subscribe by visiting [The ASAM Advocate Subscription Form](#) or by visiting asam.org/advocacy.



Learn About ASAM's Policy Principles, Leadership, and Advocacy Roadmap

Advocacy on behalf of ASAM is shaped by ASAM's core belief in a future in which addiction prevention, treatment, remission, and recovery are accessible to all, and where they profoundly improve the health of all people. You can learn more about ASAM's advocacy efforts by reading ASAM's policy principles and advocacy roadmap at asam.org/advocacy. State chapters can also use these principles and roadmap to help guide their state advocacy efforts.



Email Advocacy Questions to advocacy@asam.org

Your successful advocacy is a win for the entire addiction medicine community. That's why ASAM staff stand ready to help your efforts – just reach out! If you have any questions on material covered in this guide, need help jump-starting your advocacy, or want to share your successes, ASAM staff wants to hear from you. Send a note to advocacy@asam.org.

No matter how you decide to advocate – meeting with your lawmakers, amplifying ASAM messages on social media, interacting with the media, or presenting on addiction policy at a local stakeholder meeting— your efforts will go a long way towards improving addiction policy and our community and country.

Thank you for your advocacy!



ASAM POLICY AND RESOURCES

ASAM's website provides helpful resources, including background on policy issues and information on ASAM and The ASAM Criteria. Below is a summary of ASAM website resources that may be helpful as you learn and engage in advocacy.

PUBLIC POLICY STATEMENTS AND RELATED RESOURCES

ASAM's public policy statements guide ASAM's advocacy on legislative and regulatory issues. State chapters may also find these statements useful to cite in their state advocacy materials, and ASAM advocacy staff is happy to assist members with any questions or concerns about ASAM public policy statements. Statements are posted on ASAM's website and can be searched or filtered by topic. If you're not sure where ASAM stands on a particular issue, the public policy statements are a good place to start. Public policy statements and related resources can be found at [ASAM Public Policy Statements](#).

AMAN TRAINING MATERIALS AND VIDEOS

The **Addiction Medicine Action Network (AMAN)** is ASAM's grassroots program exclusively available to ASAM members. ASAM supports AMAN members as they:


- Establish and maintain positive working relationships with members of Congress and other key official
- Engage in advocacy and media
- Receive technical assistance from ASAM advocacy staff to develop an individualized advocacy work plan



[Visit Addiction Medicine Action Network](#) to learn more.

STATE ADVOCACY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND RESOURCES

While the federal government wields significant influence on addiction policy through programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, federal regulations, and federal grants, **state governments are the site of significant legislative and regulatory activity that directly impacts the field of addiction medicine**. ASAM proudly works with its [independent state chapters](#) to expand access to high-quality, evidence-based addiction care throughout the country. ASAM-developed policy toolkits and links to relevant external resources provide background information that can help you become familiar with a wide range of state policies impacting the field of addiction medicine.

 Visit ASAM's [State Advocacy page](#) to learn more about how ASAM Advocacy staff can help state chapters with their **state advocacy work, review general tips for state advocacy, and explore ASAM's state advocacy resources**.



Learn more about our state advocacy work



Review general tips for state advocacy



Explore ASAM's state advocacy resources

ASAM CRITERIA TOOLKIT

The ASAM Criteria toolkit offers **high-level strategies for integrating the ASAM Criteria** into a state's approach to SUD services, as well as **potential pathways that states can pursue, implementation vehicles, state examples, and model legislative, regulatory, and contractual language** from which states can draw.

 Visit "[Speaking the Same Language](#)" to learn more.



LEARNING ABOUT YOUR LEGISLATORS

Connecting with your legislators is one of the best ways to ensure they understand the issues impacting addiction medicine and policies that can help ensure addiction prevention, treatment, remission, and recovery are accessible to all. Here is some basic information on finding your Congressional representatives and the committees responsible for advancing addiction medicine legislation and funding.

In addition to using the below resources, you can also search for your federal representatives using ASAM's grassroots tool, located at the [Addiction Medicine Grassroots Action Center](#).

FINDING YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS

U.S. House of Representatives

Also referred to as a congressman or congresswoman, members of the U.S. House of Representatives are elected to a two-year term serving the people of a specific congressional district. The number of voting representatives in the House is fixed by law at no more than 435, proportionally representing the population of the 50 states.



You can find out who represents you by searching by your zip code in the upper right-hand corner of the [House of Representatives homepage](#). This page also posts general information about the House of Representatives, including the latest "floor activity" –which bills are currently up for debate and votes. This page is also a good resource for more information on the House, its committees, and history.

U.S. Senate

Two U.S. senators are elected from every state, and each is elected for a six-year term. The Constitution requires that a senator be at least 30 years old, a citizen of the United States for at least nine years, and an inhabitant of the state from which he or she is elected.



You can find your Senators by searching your state on the [Senate homepage](#) along with additional information about current Senators and legislative activity.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

There are many steps involved in a bill becoming a law. The simplified version is that:

- Bills are introduced by one or more members of Congress (or in the case of state bills, members of the state legislature)
- Considered by committees
- Voted on by members

A federal bill must pass both the U.S. House and U.S. Senate before it can be sent to the President, who must sign the passed legislation to enact it into law.



To learn more about this process at the federal level, the non-partisan [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov) provides a more detailed overview in informational videos and transcripts at [The Legislative Process](#).

COMMITTEES RELEVANT TO ASAM FEDERAL POLICY PRIORITIES

House Appropriations Committee

The U.S. Constitution grants Congress sole “power of the purse” or ability to appropriate (authorize) spending. The House Committee on Appropriations is responsible for appropriating funding for most of the functions of the federal government. This includes appropriating funding for any federal addiction medicine-related programs.



You can learn more about the House Committee on Appropriations, including who serves on the committee and the role of subcommittees, on its [homepage](#).

House Energy & Commerce Committee

The House of Energy and Commerce Committee regulates interstate and foreign commerce – meaning this committee is at the crossroads of almost every significant policy area that Congress considers, from the economy and health care (including Medicaid) to telecommunications, transportation, energy, and the environment.



You can learn more about the House Energy & Commerce Committee, including who serves on the committee, on its [homepage](#).

COMMITTEES RELEVANT TO ASAM FEDERAL POLICY PRIORITIES, cont.

House Ways & Means Committee

The Constitution requires that all bills regarding taxation must originate in the House of Representatives, so the Committee of Ways and Means was established as the chamber's chief tax-writing committee. The Committee has jurisdiction over all taxation, tariffs, and other revenue-raising measures, Medicare, and other programs.



You can learn more about the House Ways & Means Committee, including who serves on the committee, on its [homepage](#).

Senate Appropriations Committee

The Senate Committee on Appropriations, along with the House Committee on Appropriations, is responsible for allocating federal funds. Again, this includes appropriating funding for various federal addiction medicine-related programs.



You can learn more about the Senate Committee on Appropriations, including who serves on the committee and the role of subcommittees, on its [homepage](#).

Senate Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Committee

The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions, often referred to as the HELP Committee, is composed of three subcommittees, which have a broad jurisdiction over our country's health care, education, employment and retirement policies.



You can learn more about the Senate HELP Committee, including which senators serve on the committee, on its [homepage](#).

Senate Finance Committee

Like the House Ways & Means Committee, the Senate Finance Committee deals with matters relating to taxation and other revenue. Among other things, the committee oversees health programs under the Social Security Act, including Medicare, Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and other health and human services programs financed by a specific tax or trust fund.



You can learn more about the Senate Finance Committee, including who serves on the committee and the role of subcommittees, on its [homepage](#).



TIPS FOR TELLING YOUR STORY

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING FOR ADVOCACY

As healthcare professionals who treat or research addiction, you have unique and important personal experiences to share. Storytelling can be an effective tool to **confront stigma, improve understanding, and increase empathy**. A powerful story can motivate and encourage action.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE

When telling your story, consider if your audience has experience with addiction, addiction medicine or a base understanding of who ASAM is. **If you're not sure how much your audience knows, ask!** Knowing more about your audience can help you connect with them on a personal level.

When meeting with policymakers or their staff, do some prior research and see if they've sponsored addiction-medicine related legislation before or if they're supportive of other ASAM policies.

Your ask will vary based on your audience's knowledge level.

- If they *understand the issue at hand* and are supportive, thank them for their support and encourage them to keep it up.
- For those who are *interested in the issue at hand*, use your storytelling as an opportunity to educate and ask them to support ASAM efforts.
- Finally, *for unsupportive audiences*, take time to understand their perspective and use this knowledge to persuade them to reconsider while educating them further.

CONNECTING YOUR STORY TO POLICY SOLUTIONS

Think of your storytelling as an opportunity to connect policy with its real-world impact and make clear why your audience should care.

While first-hand accounts and your personal story are extremely effective, stories from patients or colleagues can be compelling, too. The important thing is to **use your story to highlight a real-world problem and tying the problem's solution back to your advocacy ask.**

Think about why you are telling your story and what you want your audience to take away.

Do you want them to:



Support a policy?



Better understand
an issue?



Advocate on your
behalf?

Tailor your story to support your ask.



ADVOCACY 101

Advocacy is all about making your voice heard, and there are many ways to do that. Here are some tips and best practices for quickly connecting with your federal representatives on email, social media, or through a phone call.

EMAIL TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

- **Emailing your members of Congress is a quick and effective way to voice your concerns, experiences, or support for legislation.** Email addresses or contact information is generally available on members' websites.
- Offices may have limitations on letter length, so it is typically best to **keep your correspondence short and to the point.**
- When writing about specific legislation, be sure to **include the bill number or title**, if you have it.
- When writing about ASAM priority legislation, **pre-written emails are often available using ASAM's advocacy center tool** available in the [Addiction Medicine Grassroots Action Center](#).

SOCIAL MEDIA TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

Social media can be a great way to share your support of ASAM policies that advance addiction medicine. Through platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook, you can learn more about your representatives' policy positions and priorities, too.

Depending on your preferred social media platform:

- Be sure to **like or follow your representatives** to stay up to date on their activity.
- By **including hashtags** of your topic, you can also increase the visibility of your posts.
- Try **searching for trending hashtags** when deciding which to use.
- **Posting on social media** has the advantage of learning more about your member of Congress while expanding public awareness around addiction medicine policy.

Sample social media posts are also available here in the appendix to this guide.

PHONE CALL TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

Phone calls are a quick and easy way to communicate your concerns to your representatives. While speaking directly with your representative may not be possible, **the congressional staff who answers the phone takes notes on all constituent calls and relays messages to representatives and relevant policy staff.**

The congressional staff can also:

- Share the representative's position on an issue
- Direct you to other resources on a specific topic
- Follow-up with additional information.

In addition to finding contact phone numbers for your representatives on their respective webpages, the **Capitol switchboard can be reached at 202-224-33121** and will direct your call to the correct office based on your address.



CONGRESSIONAL MEETINGS: WHAT TO EXPECT

No matter where you meet with your members of Congress (MOC), it's important to **be prepared with your story and your policy ask**.

If possible, and with permission, take photos during your interaction with your MOC or their staff, and share them on social media afterward, being sure to tag your MOC as well as ASAM, if your meeting was arranged by ASAM.

Here are some other general tips depending on where your meeting takes place.

TIPS FOR CAPITOL HILL MEETINGS

When visiting the Capitol or congressional office buildings for your advocacy meetings, there are a few things to keep in mind.

- First, **go into your meeting knowing your policy ask**. Plan on sharing your story but keep remarks concise and to the point.
- On Capitol Hill, interruptions are also common, so it's important to be flexible. Last minute scheduling or room changes are common, and you may also be interrupted by staff changes or bells signaling voting. It is important to **be flexible and able to adjust**.
- Finally, often you will be meeting with congressional staff rather than with your member of Congress. That's ok – congressional staffs are small and spend lots of time advising and interacting with their boss. A compelling ask will be heard, so **don't be discouraged if you don't see your member of Congress**.

TIPS FOR MEETINGS IN-DISTRICT

If you can't make it to Washington, D.C., **a great alternative time to meet with your congressional representatives is during a congressional recess**, also known as an in-district work period. These typically happen around major national holidays and during the month of August.

Since very little business is conducted in D.C. during this time, **members are able and encouraged to connect with those they represent (their constituents) back home**. Members are often more relaxed during recess with more time to talk about your issues, and meetings are often less formal than they would be on Capitol Hill.

Alternatively, representatives will often host listening sessions, town halls, or other informal and open events. You can find out about these events **by signing up for a representative's newsletter. Websites may also list open hours and district office locations** for visits.

TIPS FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS

When an in-person meeting isn't possible, sometimes a virtual meeting is an option. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many members of Congress are familiar with Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebEx and other virtual meeting platforms.

If you schedule a virtual meeting with your representative, here are a few tips to make the most of your time:

- Join the meeting a few minutes early and ensure you have the right software and connection in place. Joining early gives you some extra time to troubleshoot any technical issues.
- Be sure to check out your video feed when you sign in early. To help present yourself in the best possible way, look directly into your camera rather than at your screen. Check your lighting and avoid backlighting that can make you look silhouetted. Finally, remove distracting clutter from your background and try to position yourself where others won't be passing behind you.
- Given the limitations of video and telephone communication, avoid long monologues and try to build in occasional breaks to ask if the staffer has any questions or comments.
- In any meeting, but particularly virtual meetings, keep notes handy to help keep you on track.

MEETING RESOURCES

Sample meeting requests are available here and a suggested meeting script is available in the appendix to this guide. Following any meeting, be sure to send a follow-up thank you email. Examples of that are also available in the appendix.

Sample Capital Hill Meeting Request

Good morning,

My name is Will Gabriel, and I'm a constituent and a counselor specializing in the treatment of addiction in Houston.

[INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING BRACKETED LANGUAGE IF YOUR VISIT IS COORDINATED WITH ASAM STAFF: As a member of the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM),] I am particularly interested in legislation to improve access and quality of addiction treatment. That said, I will be visiting D.C. next month and would appreciate the opportunity to discuss some proposed policy changes to help address our nation's addiction crisis with the Congresswoman or a member of her staff familiar with healthcare policy and substance use issues.

I will be in town the week of April 13 and, ideally, could meet that Tuesday afternoon (4/14) or anytime on Wednesday (4/15).

I appreciate your consideration of my request and look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,
Will Gabriel
599 San Felipe Road
Houston, TX 77056



NEXT-LEVEL ADVOCACY

Contacting and meeting with your member of Congress (MOC) is a great way to build a relationship and support ASAM advocacy. If you're looking for ways to bring your advocacy above and beyond, consider getting more involved with ASAM. Below are some ideas to help take your advocacy effort to the next level.

WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Even in the internet age, newspapers are still a potent force in policy debates. Many often publish letters to the editor (LTE) that react to recent coverage, highlight community concerns, and share new viewpoints. Importantly, members of Congress pay close attention to what's being said in their local papers – so **getting an LTE published is an excellent way to promote policies you support.**

LTEs should:

1

Focus on just one policy issue

2

Be kept to 250 words or less, although word limitations may vary from paper to paper

3

Tie the policy ask to your personal experience

4

Share why you care enough to write about the issue

Depending on the paper, they may ask you to submit your letter through an online web form or email your letter directly. If an email, copy your letter into the body of your email and include your name, address, and phone number. Your contact information will not be published, but the paper may reach out with questions or to confirm publication.

WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR, cont.

If you are expressing a personal point of view on an issue not related to ASAM or your professional position, then you should not include your ASAM title/affiliation. If there is the possibility of confusion about whether you might be speaking on behalf of ASAM, it will be necessary to specifically indicate you are speaking as a private citizen and not as a representative of the society. ASAM staff can help clarify these situations and provide general guidance.

ASAM Advocacy staff requests that you send a copy of any letter or op-ed related to public policy that includes your ASAM title/affiliation to ASAM Advocacy staff (at advocacy@asam.org) prior to submission to the newspaper or magazine. Finally, if you see your letter publish, please be sure to send it to advocacy@asam.org, too.

GIVING A MEDIA INTERVIEW

Occasionally a reporter will contact ASAM seeking comment from an addiction specialist with first-hand experience on the topic they're covering or want to talk with someone within a specific location or field.

If you are interested in giving a media interview on ASAM policy priorities, **ASAM Advocacy staff can help prepare you with talking points, relevant data points or media training.** *Do not offer an interview as a representative of ASAM without coordinating with ASAM staff.* If a reporter requests to interview you given your capacity as an ASAM member, please refer them to ASAM staff to coordinate.

In any media interview;

- Keep your remarks disciplined and stick to no more than three main messages.
- Ensure you are maintaining professionalism because you are on record.
- If you are not certain of the answer, it is acceptable to say you will follow up with that information later.
- Before sharing any patient's stories, make sure you have their written consent or have appropriately deidentified anecdotes to avoid violating applicable privacy laws.

JOINING AMAN

ASAM's Addiction Medicine Action Network (AMAN) is a group of ASAM members **committed to building connections with lawmakers and supporting ASAM's grassroots advocacy efforts.**

AMAN members:



Engage in advocacy and media training opportunities



Access to additional advocacy tools and resources



Receive support and assistance from ASAM staff to help develop and implement an advocacy work plan.



Visit [Addiction Medicine Action Network](#) to learn more.

ATTENDING THE ADDICTION MEDICINE ADVOCACY CONFERENCE

The Addiction Medicine Advocacy Conference is a two-day event held in Washington, D.C. or virtually that **connects addiction medicine professionals with their congressional representatives.** Typically held in the spring, the conference:

- 1 **Begins with** attendees receiving training from expert advocacy professionals on the issues most important to the practice of addiction medicine and hearing from other guest speakers.
- 2 **Then,** attendees will participate in meetings with Capitol Hill policymakers and their staff to advance an ASAM's policy agenda designed to support addiction treatment professionals as they treat patients and save lives.



Visit [Addiction Medicine Advocacy Conference](#) to learn more.



APPENDIX- ADVOCACY EXAMPLES

SAMPLE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

John Hopper @jahoppermd · Sep 17, 2019

Thank you @SenGaryPeters for meeting with the #AddictionMedicine leaders of #Michigan and for your support of legislation to treat addiction and end the #opioidcrisis! #TreatAddictionSaveLives @ASAMorg



Dr Timothy Gammons and Senator Gary Peters

5 11

Katherine Mullins MD @kmullins_

Excited to participate in #AMAC22 with @ASAMorg, @ACAAMorg, @acmtmedtox, @AOAddictionMed and support the Medicaid Reentry Act (HR 955/S 285)! #TreatAddictionSaveLives

... cause of death among individuals who have been incarcerated are the first two weeks after release

1:31 PM · Mar 7, 2022 · Twitter Web App

SAMPLE MEETING REQUESTS

Capitol Hill Meeting Request

Good morning,

My name is Will Gabriel, and I'm a constituent and a counselor specializing in the treatment of addiction in Houston.

[INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING BRACKETED LANGUAGE IF YOUR VISIT IS COORDINATED WITH ASAM STAFF: As a member of the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM),] I am particularly interested in legislation to improve access and quality of addiction treatment. That said, I will be visiting D.C. next month and would appreciate the opportunity to discuss some proposed policy changes to help address our nation's addiction crisis with the Congresswoman or a member of her staff familiar with healthcare policy and substance use issues.

I will be in town the week of April 13 and, ideally, could meet that Tuesday afternoon (4/14) or anytime on Wednesday (4/15).

I appreciate your consideration of my request and look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,
Will Gabriel
599 San Felipe Road
Houston, TX 77056

IN DISTRICT MEETING REQUEST

Hello,

My name is Dr. Anna Stoerman, and I'm an addiction specialist physician practicing in Lakeland, FL. [INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING BRACKETED LANGUAGE IF YOUR VISIT IS COORDINATED WITH ASAM STAFF: I am also a member of the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM). ASAM is a professional medical society representing over 7,000 physicians, clinicians, and associated professionals in the field of addiction medicine.]

I'm reaching out to request the opportunity to meet with Congressman Franklin and discuss issues and legislation impacting quality of addiction treatment and care access for individuals living with substance use disorder.

Please let me know if there's an upcoming opportunity to meet with the Congressman or a member of his staff locally and discuss these issues further.

Thank you,
Anna
863-555-0942

SAMPLE CONGRESSIONAL MEETING SCRIPT

Introductions

- Thank the staffer for their time.
- Let them know why you're meeting.
- Briefly introduce yourself.
- If you're in a group, establish your speaking order ahead of time.

Set the Stage

- Ask the staffer if they are familiar with addiction medicine.
- Most staffers will be familiar with the "opioid crisis," but be prepared to briefly educate about the importance of addiction medicine.
- Make it personal.
- Explain what you're seeing in the district or state.

Make Your Asks

- Before making your ask, give the staffer a chance to ask questions.
- Make the asks.
- Walk the staffer through ASAM's policy requests.
- Pause between each one to allow for questions.

End the Meeting

- Allow the staffer to ask any outstanding questions.
- Offer to provide additional materials and contact information for follow-up.
- Thank them again for their time!

After the Meeting

- Send a thank you email along with any follow-up requested during your meeting.

SAMPLE POST-MEETING THANK YOU EMAIL

Hi Emily,

Thanks again for meeting with other ASAM advocates and myself yesterday!

First, I again want to thank the Congressman for his sponsorship of The Substance Use Disorder Workforce Act (H.R. 3441). This legislation, if passed, will provide 1,000 new Medicare-supported graduate medical education training positions over five years in hospitals that have or are establishing accredited residency programs in addiction medicine, addiction psychiatry, or pain medicine.

I also wanted to reiterate my support for the Medication Access and Training Expansion (MATE) Act (H.R. 2067) which would ensure controlled medication prescribers registered with the Drug Enforcement Administration have received at least eight hours of education on treating and managing patients with substance use disorder.

Finally, I also want to again encourage you and your boss to look into the Medicaid Reentry Act (H.R. 955). This bill would allow states to restart Medicaid coverage for eligible individuals who are incarcerated up to 30 days before their release from jail or prison and expand access to evidence-based addiction care to save lives.

If you have any follow-up questions on any of these issues or ways in which I can be supportive of this legislation back in the district, please don't hesitate to ask. Please also find attached copies of yesterday's leave-behind materials for further reference.

Once again, appreciate your time and the work you do for New York!

Best,
Peter Kent, MD, DFASAM
Medical Director, Harris Hamilton Health Center
New York, NY

SAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR

[Key to Harm Reduction: Buy-In From People With Addiction](#)

With overdose deaths skyrocketing to never-before-seen levels, the United States needs harm reduction strategies to protect the health and wellness of Americans. In 2020, 41 million Americans needed substance use treatment within the previous year; however, of those who needed such treatment but did not receive it at a specialty facility, [a staggering 97.5%](#) did not feel they needed it. Although America has a troubling treatment gap exacerbated by systemic legal and regulatory barriers to evidence-based addiction care, most people who need substance use treatment don't want this treatment as it is currently being offered.

To support our friends and family members living with addiction, our system must also embrace harm reduction approaches that engage people who use drugs (PWUD) before they are ready for abstinence-based treatment (["As Biden Fights Overdoses, Harm Reduction Groups Face Local Opposition,"](#) June 14).

Harm reduction saves lives. Drug checking services and naloxone distribution prevent overdose deaths, while syringe and related service programs help stop the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis. These are all worthy ends in themselves, but harm reduction has the further benefit of building a meaningful alliance between health care professionals and PWUD. With this therapeutic relationship, PWUD have facilitated access to high-quality, evidence-based treatment and services when they become ready for this help. It's an obvious point, but too many people overlook the fact that a person can't receive treatment or enter recovery if they're dead.

As a physician, I swore an oath to do no harm — not to do nothing. Failing to embrace and expand harm reduction efforts, by definition, leaves too many of our friends, family members, and loved ones at an unacceptable risk of dying. The dichotomy between offering more addiction treatment and providing PWUD with the tools they need to live healthier lives is a false choice. The United States must simultaneously invest in treatment expansion and increase the availability of low-threshold harm reduction services; otherwise, I fear the country's addiction and drug overdose crisis will continue to get worse.

— Dr. Brian Hurley, president-elect of the American Society of Addiction Medicine's Board of Directors, Los Angeles**

** ASAM title/affiliation is referenced because LTE was coordinated with ASAM Staff.