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Hiring a State Lobbyist Government Relations, September 2007

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Follow this primer to guide your state associations in hiring a lobbyist.

Our state associations are managed by volunteers, and one of their most daunting tasks is finding a lobbyist. If they've worked with a contractor before, they may have a bit more confidence—but if they're involved for the first time, it can be quite intimidating. They may not know where to start. We offer our state leaders support in a variety of ways.

Assess Your Needs

First, assume your volunteer leaders know nothing. Volunteers rotate into jobs, and this may be their first government relations experience. Or they may have inherited this responsibility by virtue of their elected office. When working with a member who is new to GR or an association that's just getting into the game, we offer a primer on how to assemble a request for proposal (RFP), what to look for in a contract, and realistic expectations for a day-to-day working relationship.

Second, assume you *don't* know everything. State legislative processes may look the same on paper, but their rules, cultures, and even terminology vary widely. A tactic that might work in one place will backfire in another. We understand that and do not attempt to force a cookie-cutter strategy. Rather, we look for ways to support them at the beginning and throughout the process.

Re-Evaluate Your Expectations

As everyone in the GR Section knows, there are many intangibles when selecting your advocate. We caution our members to look first at themselves and their expectations; the lobbyist they select will be their voice, and it should be someone with a compatible approach or style. Will your state volunteers be more comfortable with a "one man show," or do they want the support of a team that can be found in a lobbying firm? Will they need legal or media advice? How important are regulatory contacts?

We also warn our members that their representative is likely to have a variety of clients and to be realistic about the time demands they can make.

Determine a Job Description

When advising your state volunteers about the services they can expect from a lobbyist, offer a list of requirements for a good candidate. Below is a list of responsibilities a lobbyist might be hired to handle:

- Serve as a conduit for information—to and from the legislature and state agencies.
- Have established relationships with key legislators and staff.
- Accurately and persuasively present the organization's views.
- Keep the client informed of key developments and factors that could affect the legislation.
- Advise when concessions are necessary, or when you should stand your ground.
- Conduct regular "reality checks."

You should also inform your state volunteers of their own responsibilities in working with a lobbyist:

Know the type of person you'll be comfortable working with.

Arm the lobbyist with information, including legislative history and anticipated opposition.

Be candid about any weaknesses in your position.

Be available; have a clearly established communication plan, an identified contact, and an identified decision maker who can agree to amendments or compromises.

Be honest about your financial and member resources. Do you have competent witnesses who can testify? Do you have the resources to send them to the Capitol—on a day's notice? Can you deliver the grassroots?

Be Thorough in the Interview Process

We give our state associations sample interview questions and tips on checking references. Our package includes a template for the RFP. We suggest that our state volunteers look at the lobbyist's client list for potential conflicts of interest.

Our state volunteers often ask us how much they should expect to pay their lobbyist. The answer to this question varies. We look to what other state chapters expend, and we advise our state volunteers to check with similarly sized and situated organizations in their own state.

Stand By as a Resource for the Lobbyist

The last thing we do is attempt to establish a relationship directly with the lobbyist. While we don't want to interfere in any way in the process or communication between the state association and its chosen advocate, establishing the national organization as a resource and making the lobbyist aware of our interest has been of enormous help. Lobbyists often send me emails or call me directly, asking for information I can probably round up faster than someone locally. I may be more accessible than the local contact because this is my primary job.

Hiring a state lobbyist can be a daunting task for your state-level volunteers. By serving as a guide to help your volunteers through the process, you can ensure that the right person is ultimately selected for the job.

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