

CHAPTER INVOLVEMENT

BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM

It is always important to remember that the focus of the Air Force Sergeants Association is on improving the quality of the lives of current and past total force enlisted Airmen and their families. We primarily do this through our legislative advocacy program. The directorate of Military and Government Relations (M&GR), led by AFSA's Chief Executive Officer, works hard in Washington to influence Congress and the Administration to amend Public Law--to create, maintain, and protect quality-of-life programs.

Of course, we know that chapters comprise the grassroots infrastructure (at the lowest level) that supports the Headquarters' important work. And we know chapters select trustees who focus on the legislative effort. It also goes without saying that it is important for AFSA members to be familiar with the AFSA Legislative Platform and to keep up on the legislative news provided by AFSA Headquarters. But just how does a chapter set up an effective legislative program? What are some of the "mechanics" of the process? In this section, we provide a few suggestions to consider when working to build a comprehensive, effective chapter program that will complement the M&GR effort. These are only suggestions, but they may be tailored to meet the needs and challenges of each chapter should it want to be an effective complement to the AFSA Headquarters legislative advocacy program.

1. Annual Legislative Planning Meeting. It all starts with planning. At the beginning of each year, working closely with the chapter president, the chapter's legislative trustee should conduct a legislative program planning meeting. During that meeting the following tasks should be accomplished:

a. *Establish the chapter's legislative team.* The legislative trustee should assign individuals who will seek to become experts in various legislative subject areas (e.g., education, Active Duty affairs, retirement, veterans' affairs, pay and compensation, health care, Guard affairs, Reserve affairs, family issues, etc.). Working with the president, the trustee should also assign separate, responsible individuals to manage the chapter's Legislative Awareness Week activities, POW/MIA Day/Week activities, participation in Voter Registration, AFSA's Legislative Awards program, and the chapter's communication of information to local individuals—the "grassroots." These program managers should report progress for their particular programs at each chapter meeting.

b. The chapter should mark its calendar with specific target dates for:

(1) *AFSA Legislative Platform Inputs.* AFSA Headquarters annually calls for these inputs sometime between October and December. Each chapter should plan ahead so it is able to facilitate discussion of issues in advance, get the input of AFSA members, and be ready to participate in this important activity. Questions on this should be directed to the M&GR directorate at AFSA Headquarters.

(2) *Letter-writing campaigns.* Plan to conduct such campaigns during the year. Sometimes referred to as "letter writing bees," these provide training for members, communicate our point of view on key issues to Congress, and allow participating Airmen to get response correspondence from their senators and representatives. Most important, these letters complement and strengthen AFSA Headquarters' messages on the Hill.

(3) *Visits to Statehouses.* If there are local/state issues of importance that need to be worked, schedule visits to the statehouse. AFSA Headquarters can provide guidance on such visits.

(4) *Meeting(s) with U.S. Senators and Representatives.* Plan to visit with elected officials when they return to their home states and districts during congressional recesses ("work periods"). Call the local offices of these officials early in the year to determine when they plan to speak, provide town hall meetings, etc. Make sure chapter members are aware of such public meetings.

2. Legislative Awareness Week(LAW)/Day. Early in the year, the person selected to manage this activity needs to set planning dates and details early and reserve the facility/facilities to be used. He/she should invite local military and civic leaders early and remember to include command chief master sergeants and first sergeants and contact keynote and other speakers who will be invited to participate. It is also important the chapter's LAW manager plans the kinds, types, and timetable of publicity efforts. In short, early planning and careful consideration will greatly enhance chances for a great Legislative Awareness Week.

3. POW/MIA Week/Day. A chapter's POW/MIA Week/Day manager should follow the same basic approach as listed for Legislative Awareness Week/Day. Good, early planning is required. Additional effort will be required if the chapter plans to locate and invite former POWs who live in the local area. Early planning and action are desirable in order to secure the necessary participants, reserve facilities, get on the local military and

civic leaders' calendars, etc. By the chapter having an individual assigned to focus on this program, that person will be able to stay on top of the many arrangements that will be required.

4. Voter Registration Program. AFSA has long been in the lead on our bases and in our communities to assist local voter registration officials and encourage military members to have their voice heard through the election process. The chapter's voting manager should contact the local Voting Assistance Officer to offer assistance in providing materials, answering questions, etc. It is important not to forget the need to let Airmen know well in advance when and how they can register to vote. Again, early publicity should be planned. Finally, it is good to get as many chapter members as possible/practical involved in the process of voter registration and information assistance.

5. Legislative Awards Program. AFSA Headquarters annually recognizes individuals and field organizations that make major contributions to the AFSA Headquarters' legislative effort. Early in the year, a chapter's legislative awards chairman/manager should conduct a meeting to predetermine what will be in the chapter's submission package to be submitted later in the year. For example, will the chapter conduct a certain number of letter-writing campaigns? Will the program involve providing legislative information to local leaders, advertising AFSA's program, and emphasizing AFSA's role in quality-of-life programs? Will the chapter regularly provide information to the local Retiree Affairs Office to share with local retirees/veterans, etc? Will visits be planned to the statehouse or to local officials, or to U.S. senators and representatives when they are in their home areas? All of these and more should be planned early in the year so they can be fulfilled during the year and so the chapter will be "assembling" the components that will eventually be a part of its recognition package submission. The awards manager must remember to determine early who will write the package. Remember, the package can be written/structured throughout the year, then finalized at the appropriate time prior to submission. The chapter's calendar should be marked with the dates to write, review, complete, and submit the Legislative Awards nomination package. The manager should check with AFSA Headquarters well in advance to ensure certainty of submission dates and procedures.

6. Grassroots Communication. The chapter's manager for this endeavor should plan methods of communicating the information AFSA will provide during the year and the ways the chapter will publicize its local legislative

support programs. One important element of chapter communication often overlooked is the need to regularly communicate with local commanders, command chief master sergeants, and first sergeants. In this regard, the chapter should make it a point to let these leaders know what AFSA is doing in Washington to improve their lives and those of the Airmen they lead. This information may include legislative updates as they are received from AFSA Headquarters. The chapter's grassroots communication manager should communicate with AFSA Headquarters to know what key issues are on the table in Washington and when to best get the grassroots energized to send letters to Congress. Finally, planning should be conducted to determine the ways to encourage further grassroots participation throughout the year.

Obviously, we have used the word "plan" many times within this section. The reason is simple: good planning leads to a successful program. Poor planning leads to ineffectiveness and, oftentimes, embarrassment.

The clear intent of these legislative program planning/building efforts should be to establish the chapter as the "go to" place for Airmen to bring their legislative/quality-of-life ideas and the place local leaders go to get their information on what their Association is doing for them in Washington. Chapters should strive to be the local "eyes and ears" of AFSA Headquarters. They should help AFSA identify legislative targets to pursue on the Hill. Each AFSA chapter should be recognized as the local source of accurate information on quality-of-life programs and a local element of a great international association that leads the way in advocacy efforts for current and former Airmen, their families, and their survivors. Finally, each chapter should help AFSA recognize those who have been responsible for creating and maintaining excellent legislative programs. Remember, a successful local legislative program can greatly assist AFSA Headquarters in getting the job done in Washington.

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