The power of grassroots commitment

The strength of The American Dietetic Association (ADA) lies in our members’ efforts to spread our messages of nutrition and health to as many audiences as possible. As a national association, we are effecting positive change as a 70,000-strong voice for the profession. And, when we extend our dietetics expertise through local activities—as individuals or in small groups—we make the personal, one-on-one contacts that complement and strengthen our achievements as an association.

Next month, we have valuable opportunities to extend ADA’s grassroots influence and expand public understanding of the dietetics profession through key Association efforts: National Nutrition Month® (NNM) and the Public Policy Workshop.

CELEBRATING GOOD NUTRITION AND THE PROFESSION
Take advantage of the March observance of NNM to highlight the importance of healthful food choices and physical activity to your patients, clients, and consumers. This year’s theme, “Food & Fitness: Health for a Lifetime,” emphasizes the importance of proper nutrition and regular physical activity at every stage of life—and not just in March, but in every month of the year.

I encourage you to think creatively about ways you can spread the ADA message of healthful eating and fitness locally. Last year, ADA members initiated a wide scope of successful activities, including:

- Offering grocery store tours;
- Creating special displays for schools, health-care facilities, retail stores, and other venues;
- Staging plays, nutrition quizzes, raffles, and other educational entertainment;
- Distributing nutrition education materials and giving presentations in schools and health-care facilities;
- Giving cooking demonstrations;
- Sponsoring poster contests;
- Setting up farmers’ markets; or
- Hosting nutrition fairs for employees of soup kitchens and food pantries.

NNM products were featured in the catalog of products and services mailed with your October 1999 issue of the Journal. In addition, NNM news releases and other NNM items are available on the ADA Web site (www.eatright.org/nnm/); NNM Fact Sheets, NNM Key Messages, NNM Order Form, and NNM Promotion Ideas are available on the Web site and from the ADA Fax Library (800/877-1600, option 9).

Besides providing a unique context for sharing nutrition and fitness messages, NNM is also a time to celebrate the dietetics profession. As you’re spreading the word about healthful eating and fitness, remind your audiences that ADA members are the expert sources for food and nutrition information. Our local and regional NNM efforts not only can educate about making healthful lifestyle choices, but they also provide an opportunity to raise public awareness of the value of dietetics professionals.

CHANGING PUBLIC POLICY—ONE VOTE AT A TIME
Nowhere is individual involvement more crucial to success than in the effort to influence public policy. Grassroots activities may not be the flashy part of a campaign to influence policy, but winning without them is nearly impossible.

The current top federal legislative issue for ADA—the Medicare Medical Nutrition Therapy Act—is an example of the power of members’ individual efforts. Just 4 years after the legislation was first introduced, and for the second consecutive Congress, the bill has achieved the support of a majority of the House of Representatives and more than a quarter of the Senate.

This is progress we could not have made without the support of thousands of grassroots ADA members who wrote letters to Congress, had site visits and meetings with members of Congress and staff, participated in the annual Public Policy Workshop, penned letters to local newspapers, joined grassroots political campaign activities, and provided support for ADA’s political action committee (ADAPAC). All of these efforts have rapidly moved the Medicare medical nutrition therapy (MNT) issue into the forefront.

The public policy process is slow by design. This can result in frustration for those trying to influence important policies. But persistence is vital to victory: While the Medicare Medical Nutrition Therapy Act has advanced significantly in a relatively short period of time, there are still obstacles to conquer.

The strength of the ADA grassroots network has been in its continuous support of this issue.

Ultimately, representatives and senators must answer to the people they represent. By supporting the MNT bill, members of Congress—who know that the vast majority of ADA members vote—have demonstrated they want to support the concerns of their constituents. It is vital to the process that grassroots support continues and grows during what will prove to be the most critical time for the legislation. And the skills learned in the campaign for MNT will be equally applicable to other ADA issues that will require grassroots action.

An important tool ADA offers members seeking to hone their grassroots advocacy skills is the Public Policy Workshop, which is planned for March 19 to 21 in Washington, DC. Attendees will hear the latest on MNT, including plans for Medicare reform in the second session of the 106th Congress; learn the best techniques for presenting the case for MNT to policy makers and winning their support; participate in interactive sessions that are designed to expand year-round grassroots involvement; hear from other nutrition professionals who have been successful in grassroots advocacy; meet Washington insiders, including members of Congress, congressional staff, and administration officials; and spend a day at Capitol Hill meeting with members of Congress and their staffs. For more information on the Public Policy Workshop, E-mail govaffairs@eatright.org, or call the Washington, DC, office at 800/877-0877.

It’s impossible to overestimate the collective power of the thousands of members who are, one by one, furthering the profession through personal efforts as diverse as talking to high school students about the Food Guide Pyramid, E-mailing a local political candidate, holding a class on how to read a nutrition label, and casting a vote. Next month, let us make it our goal as a group to extend our impact as individuals.—ANN GALLAGHER, RD.