

Troisi: Everyone has a role to play in public health advocacy

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Taking a stand on public health issues may seem intimidating, but longtime advocates know it can be easy to get started. Cathy Troisi, PhD, associate professor in the Divisions of Management, Policy and Community Health and Epidemiology and coordinator of the Leadership Studies Concentration at the Center for Infectious Diseases at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston School of Public Health and chair of APHA's Action Board, shares the importance of speaking up on behalf of public health.

How did you first get involved in public health advocacy, and how did that grow?

It started when I was first appointed to the Action Board. We made Hill visits, talking to the legislative aides that dealt with health, (which) showed that you could really have an input. I believe we have to make our voices heard. Legislators work for us; they need to know what we're thinking.

When Ebola happened, APHA called me and asked if I would testify...at the U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Field Hearing in Dallas. Despite the fact that I had broken my shoulder two weeks before and had a concussion, I flew to Dallas with my cane and my arm in a sling, and I testified before the committee.

Since then, I've had...a total of 16 op-eds that I've written. I make my phone calls (to legislators) almost every day. But I think I can have a bigger role by spurring on other people. That's why I like my role in the Action Board. It has a multiplying effect, more than just me calling or writing a letter.

What work on the Action Board are you particularly proud of, and what work do you think there is still to be done?

Our role on the Action Board is to spur our Sections, (Special Primary Interest Groups), Affiliates, Caucuses, etc. to action — again, that catalytic effect. When I was first appointed to the Action Board and I talked at one of our (Epidemiology Section) leadership meetings, I was told, "Epidemiologists aren't political. We do science." The Epi Section has really come to life. They are making phone calls. They had some op-eds published. They really are getting involved, so I'm particularly proud of that.

Every APHA member should be doing something. I'm an introvert. I hate to make phone calls. Once you do it, you realize how easy it is. It's the same with Hill visits. Do I think I'm going to change Sen. (Ted) Cruz's mind? No, probably not, but they need to hear from people who oppose their views because otherwise, all they hear from are people who agree with them.

Troisi



If somebody wants to dip their toe into public health advocacy, but they don't know where to start, what would you recommend?

The more effort you put into it, the more (lawmakers) pay attention to it. Showing up in person has the most effect. Obviously, not everybody can do that, but you can... write an email. Start that way. There's, for us introverts, no human interaction, (but you're) still making your voice heard.

Those of us at APHA, we may not benefit from what happens for ourselves. Clean air, clean water, yes, we all benefit. But a lot of it is benefiting vulnerable populations that may not have a voice. It's up to us to do it.

APHA offers resources for public health advocacy through its Public Health Action campaign, including talking points, fact sheets and sample letters. To get involved, visit www.apha.org/phact.

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