

Government Relations Chair and Committee

Each chapter should have a mechanism for addressing state legislative and regulatory issues. State issues can affect the practice of radiology as much as federal initiatives. The ACRA outlines below how chapters may better advocate for their members by establishing a legislative committee.

Forming a Committee

Most chapters will begin the process by forming a legislative committee composed of chapter members. This committee will typically provide information to the chapter's board of directors or executive committee, which will make the decisions on how to address the legislative and regulatory issues. The executive committee or chapter board often determines in advance the functions, objectives, meeting intervals and makeup of the committee.

Chairing a Committee

Once a chapter decides to form a government relations committee, the board or executive committee next must determine who will chair the committee, how long he or she will serve, and how the chapter will replace him or her at the end of the term. In deciding the term length and the process for succession, the chapter must balance long-term continuity and stability and a more varied, representative approach. Chapters that wish to provide greater representation through more frequent rotation of their chair and committee members should consider their state legislative cycle. Most legislative sessions tend to last two years, with some issues being carried over both sessions.

Chapters should remember that one of the fundamental goals for their government relations committee is to develop relationships with legislators and staff. This relationship-building process often takes a great deal of time. Therefore, chapters might consider extending the terms of committee members and the chair. Some chapters may ask the chair to hold the position for several years to provide the maximum degree of stability and consistency.

At the completion of the chair's term, chapters often choose to fill the vacancy with a member from the committee to provide continuity and stability to the state government relations program.

The committee chair should (1) have a dedicated interest in government relations; (2) understand basic legislative and regulatory processes; (3) be willing to serve for the full term of the assignment and at least one additional term on the committee after serving as chair; and (4) be able to work and interact continually with state legislators, regulators and their staffs, as well as with the members of the committee and the board or executive committee. Some chapters may opt to select someone who already has experience in government relations. While expertise always matters, a strong involvement and interest in government relations may prove equally important. Ideally, a chair should understand the process and the commitment and dedication needed to obtain the chapter's goals.

Committee Chair and Board Relations

The chapter leadership should guide the chair of the government relations committee in determining (1) how the chapter will make decisions, (2) who will communicate with the lobbyist or legislative advocate, (3) who will communicate with ACRA staff and leadership, (4) who will represent the chapter before the government (for example, testifying and meeting with representatives), and (5) who will organize and communicate with the membership. The decisions on these issues should come from the board or executive committee. The guidelines should be explicit enough to convey the lines of communication but not so explicit that they inhibit the ability of the committee to respond quickly on issues when necessary.

The government relations committee chair and the board or executive committee will make many important decisions regarding the direction of government relations activity on behalf of the chapter. ***However, a chapter cannot rely solely on a government relations committee chair and its lobbyist to perform all the necessary state legislative functions.*** Having active members involved with the government relations committee is very important to the chapter.

A committee that ranges in size from three to seven members will serve as a sounding board for the chair and the board or executive committee on what legislative initiatives to pursue each year. Additionally, having committee members in place helps ease the issue of succession when a chair's term expires. Committee members can serve as valuable resources for meeting with state legislators, testifying at committee hearings, conducting research on issues and engaging in outreach projects for the chapter's state legislative efforts. In selecting members for the committee, the chapter can best determine a proper mix that is acceptable to its membership. For instance, a chapter may wish to develop a committee representation that reflects the various subparts of the practice of radiology (for example, by subspecialty, type of practice or region).

Selecting Issues

Those chapters that do not have the financial resources to hire a lobbyist can conserve expenses and still remain active with state legislative issues. The state government relations committee should keep in mind that the vast majority of bills introduced and regulations proposed at the state level have little relevance to radiologists, have little chance of passage, or both. If funds are scarce and the legislative climate is benign, the chapter might consider retaining a firm for surveillance purposes only and saving funds in an account to use when more activity is warranted, such as when a particularly adverse bill arises or when the chapter wants to sponsor legislation.

Be sure that the chapter chooses its issues carefully. On many issues, the interests of radiologists match those of our physician colleagues. Generally, state medical societies have deeper pockets and more lobbyists than the state radiology chapter. The chapter should not commit funds to issues that the general medical community will likely address.

Committee Functions

The government relations committee should meet on an ongoing basis with at least one meeting before the legislative session to plan and strategize. This allows enough time to present ideas to the chapter's board or executive committee for consideration. The committee must keep the lines of communication open, particularly while the legislature is in session.

Government relations committees should develop their own networks to assure expeditious communication. This will enable the committee to do its work promptly. Some states may also choose to implement a "key contact" system to rally support for a position to be taken at the state capitol. The ACRA can assist the states in developing such an approach.

Chapters should allow the government relations chair or a committee member to address the chapter membership at meetings to update them on government relations activity. In addition, the chapter may want to consider developing a newsletter on state government relations efforts. Some chapters may opt to include a section on government relations activities in an existing newsletter. Either way, the chapter's membership can remain involved and fully informed by having timely and accurate information. Such efforts will provide the groundwork to create a grassroots program your chapter may want to start in the future.