**Grassroots Power: A Government Affairs Guide**

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**WHAT IS "GRASSROOTS POWER?"**  
“Money is the mother’s milk of politics.” The late State Treasurer Jesse Unruh was renowned for that statement; it has been repeated over and over as an explanation of how the State Capitol operates.

But, fortunately, one thing is more important than money to politicians: voters. No elected official survives without them, and in voters, the California Association for Medical Laboratory Technology (CAMLT) is wealthy. Legislators are besieged with requests; at times they must turn deaf ears to businesses, local government, trade associations or other groups…but when voters speak, legislators almost always listen.

CAMLT is comprised of voters and constituents. To carve out a place on the legislative agenda, to become advocates for change, CAMLT must organize and activate its membership throughout the state. The Association’s strength is at the grassroots. CAMLT must create a structure and a system of legislative advocacy, and in doing so, ensure that its message will be heard.

Grassroots power is the creating of a role for everyone to participate and contribute something to reaching a goal. Matching a willing person’s skills to the needs of the task is what builds an effective grassroots network. The goal of grassroots power is to equip CAMLT members with the tools they need to express their views on important legislative proposals affecting CAMLT.

**I. A GRASSROOTS LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM**  
In California, most organizations cannot succeed in the State Capitol without an effective legislative advocate. But that alone is not enough to prevail over well-heeled, competing health care interests. The advocate’s efforts must be combined with a finely-tuned, well-honed grassroots legislative program. A well-organized grassroots program can dramatically alter the course of legislative decisions.

With competition for the health care dollar and battles over professional “turf” increasing, the California Association for Medical Laboratory Technology must muster all its resources to ensure an effective, well-coordinated program to promote its interests and concerns. This requires clear definition of objectives, good lines of communication, and a major commitment from CAMLT members throughout the state.

**II. GOALS OF A GRASSROOTS LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM**CAMLT’s objective must be to make its issues a priority in the minds of legislators. With term limits it is critical to educate new legislators quickly. There are at least 30 new legislators every two years. Constant grassroots contact is the tool to offset the lack of legislative institutional memory. With a continuous grassroots effort, CAMLT can build an understanding of medical laboratory technology and clinical laboratory scientists. Efforts on specific pieces of legislation--to preserve California’s high standard for medical laboratory personnel; to protect the quality of medical laboratory testing; or to preserve the licensed medical laboratory technologists’ ability to provide safe, efficient, and affordable medical laboratory services--can be most effective when implemented against the background of knowledge and understanding that an effective grassroots network develops.

In order to be most effective, a grassroots network must operate as a team. This team consists of two levels of activity. The first level is the lobbying efforts of CAMLT’s legislative advocate. The second is the coordinated mobilization of CAMLT’s grassroots network.

**The Legislative Advocate**  
The legislative advocate is CAMLT’s expert on the Legislature and the legislative process. The legislative advocate is the “quarterback” of the team. All activities of the grassroots network must be coordinated at this level in order to enhance, support and maximize the advocate’s efforts.

**The Grassroots Network**The grassroots network is the most important component of the team; they are the team players. This level includes the Board, district consultants, committee chairs, public policy coordinators, legislative keypersons and CAMLT members, all of whom work in conjunction with the advocate’s activities. To reinforce CAMLT’s efforts in Sacramento, the grassroots network must be able to effectively communicate with legislators through personal contacts, letters, emails, or telephone calls quickly and urgently. Those who operate at the grassroots level must also understand CAMLT's legislative objectives.

A grassroots network is successful in large part because the legislators know that the folks back home, the voters back home, are as informed and dedicated to CAMLT’s goals as the Association’s legislative advocate in Sacramento.

**III. THE PUBLIC POLICY COORDINATOR**The pivotal link between CAMLT’s efforts in the State Capitol and the keypersons at the grassroots level is the government relations/public policy coordinator (or minuteman). Every local chapter of CAMLT must have one.

The coordinator should be appointed by the chapter president and approved by the membership. He or she need not be a chapter officer. Any person with the necessary qualifications and desire can fill the role. Continuity of effort is the most important requirement.

The coordinator’s role is critical. The legislative advocate will issue an action alert to the executive board, who will then alert the district consultants and individual chapter coordinators. These alerts will request the chapter membership to hold meetings with their legislators, initiate letter writing campaigns, begin a telephone tree or initiate an email broadcast. The coordinator implements the action alerts and coordinates legislative activities. He or she monitors what keypersons are doing at all times and consults with them to make sure all bases are covered on a specific bill. The coordinator confers with chapter leaders about possible site visits or speaking engagements by a legislator.

Another role of the coordinator is to provide feedback to the legislative advocate on significant legislative or political activities at the local level. The coordinator should be the local Chapter’s ears and eyes.

Because of extensive responsibilities, the coordinator may want to spread the workload by setting up an advisory Public Policy Committee. The committee can help:

* Enlist a core group of 15 to 20 persons (and more if possible) to contact legislative offices and to respond to legislative alerts,
* Organize a telephone tree to respond to legislative alerts,
* Recruit legislative key persons,
* Initiate email broadcasts.

An effective public policy coordinator should have strong knowledge of the chapter and its members, be comfortable with administrative and communications skills, attend to detail and follow-through, be able to grasp the public policy issues facing CAMLT, be willing to learn the legislative process, have strong motivational skills, and have the time to devote to doing the job. Without actions, the best ideas or messages die unseen and unheard.

**IV. LEGISLATIVE KEYPERSONS**Critical at the grassroots level are “keypersons,” individuals who establish personal contact with their legislators.

Legislators cannot be familiar with every bill before them. They rely on staff or other individuals to develop an understanding of the issues. Often constituents in a particular profession or with interests are identified and their names kept on file for the legislator to contact on specific topics.

Building relationships with influential people or elected officials are largely a matter of individual style. The role of the keyperson does not necessarily require a great deal if time. It does demand perseverance in establishing and maintaining credibility. The alert keyperson will look for different opportunities to advance CAMLT issues in the mind of one or two local lawmakers who must be made aware that they are hearing from their voters, who ultimately hold the key to their future in politics. Legislative battles are won one vote at a time.

The specific responsibilities of a keyperson are to:

* Develop personal relationships of trust and respect with elected officials.
* Establish a sound two-way communication with a legislator, inform him or her about issues involving medical laboratory science and personnel, and solicit the legislator's response and concerns.
* Keep the legislator fully informed on legislative or regulatory activities involving medical laboratory technology and personnel that could affect his or her district.
* Maintain good communication with the public official's staff, particularly in the district office.
* Promptly report to the public policy coordinator any contacts with elected officials so that the results can be communicated to the legislative advocate in Sacramento.

If the keyperson is willing and has the personal resources, he or she may be asked to attend a political fundraising event in the legislator's district. Keypeople may be requested to contact the legislator about a key bill, or arrange a site visit to a medical laboratory, or invite the legislator to a chapter meeting or function. Some keypersons may choose to become active in a lawmaker's or a candidate's political campaign.

**The keyperson becomes a symbol of the organization.** The higher that person's visibility, reliability and credibility, the greater the chances are of advancing the goals of CAMLT.

Like the public policy coordinator, a keyperson must have a sound grasp of CAMLT'S objectives, goals, concerns, and issues. The keyperson should also be able to communicate comfortably and effectively.

The keyperson should be outgoing and able to readily establish good personal relationships. In addition, a keyperson should be available to meet with public officials and invest time for follow-up activities; should live in the legislator's district; be interested in the political process; and should welcome this important role.

**V. HOW TO GET TO KNOW LEGISLATORS**

**A. Attend Public Meetings**The easiest way to get to know your legislator is to attend public meetings. Many legislators hold meetings in libraries, county fairs or pancake breakfasts at the local park. This is one way they get to know local citizens and their concerns. By understanding issues in the community, a legislator can more adequately represent constituents.

**B. Make an appointment.**Two to five persons should attend a meeting with a legislator or legislative staff. More than five persons may invite a speech rather than a dialogue. Try to include a representative cross section in the delegation, such as male and female, young and old. Know your legislator's background on the particular issue. How has he or she voted on this or similar proposals? Be prepared to stress the importance of this issue in the legislator's district.

Select a spokesperson and assign roles. Plan what each of you will discuss in the meeting--such as medical laboratory technology background or district information. Don't repeat information already provided by someone else. Be direct, clear, and most importantly, be brief.

Leave something tangible with the legislator, [CAMLT's Laboratory Brochure for Legislators](https://camlt.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Brochure-for-Legislators_2.pdf), a business card, list of supporters, copy of the bill, a letter discussing CAMLT's opposition or support for a bill--anything that will be a reminder of your visit and CAMLT's position.

End your visit with a question. For example, "Can we count on your vote?" or "Can we send you more information?" Ask what the legislator's position or view is. If there is no position, volunteer to send more information and continue to lobby that individual through the use of phone calls, letters, and additional visits. Follow up with a letter of thanks. Express your appreciation for the visit, summarize its purpose again, and repeat the position you would like the legislator to take.

**C. Checklist for Legislative Meetings**CAMLT members should be brief, to the point and reasonable. CAMLT members should anticipate a number of questions when they talk to public officials about specific legislation, for example:

* What problem is being addressed? Does a problem exist? If discussing a bill, know your legislator's role on the bill. Where is the bill in the legislative process? Does your legislator sit on a relevant committee? How can a legislator act on your behalf?
* What is the legislation's intent?
* How else can its goal be met? Are the bill's goals viable?
* Has this proposal come before the Legislature before? If so, when, why, and what was the outcome? Why is this bill different/the same?
* Who opposes/supports the legislation? Why?
* How does the political climate affect the bill? What is the likely public response? Why?
* How much will the legislation cost the state? Where will the money come from? Will this legislation save money?
* How many people would benefit/be harmed by the legislation?
* What are the local effects and tangible, positive outcomes that will result if the legislator votes as you recommend?
* Is this something positive to vote for (as opposed to fear of consequences)?

Try to anticipate the questions and be prepared with the answers. If you don't know an answer, say so, and promise to find the answer and to get it quickly to the official asking the question. Immediately contact the legislative advocate in Sacramento to pass along the question. Above all, don't bluff, and don't make up answers. One misstatement can destroy your credibility and the credibility of CAMLT as well.

After the meeting, hold a debriefing of the delegation. This will insure that the group knows what was said, what was promised, and what the next step should be to secure the legislator's vote. Also, send the legislator a thank you note and include some additional information and documentation.

ALWAYS Summarize your conclusions and promptly report them to your public policy coordinator and to CAMLT's legislative advocate in Sacramento.

**D. Telephone Calls**When telephoning a legislator or legislative staff, identify yourself by name and profession and as a constituent if you live in the district. Identify the bill by its number and author i.e. AB 111 (Smith). Briefly state your position on the legislation and how you would like the legislator to vote. Ask for the legislator's view--remembering that diplomacy and tact will keep the door open for further contact. If you talk with staff, request that your message be relayed to the legislator. Notify your public policy coordinator about the call and any outcome.

**E. Letters**

* Letters should be on personal or business letterhead, with a return address on both the letter and envelope.
* Each letter should be about only one piece of legislation and should identify that bill by its number and author.
* Don't misspell the legislator's name or identify the wrong bill.
* Any type of written communication--even a postcard--is better than nothing.
* Legislators tend to discount form letters. Use your own words to advance CAMLT's position.
* Stress how a particular issue would affect persons in the legislator's district--namely you.
* Try to keep your letter to one page. Make the points simple and concise.
* Keep in mind that the reader may not be familiar with the subject matter.
* Ask for a reply indicating the legislator's position.
* Make sure your public policy coordinator gets a copy of the letter, and always send a copy to the legislative advocate.