2016 AACAP Legislative Conference Recap – Successfully Advancing Children’s Mental Health

Ronald Szabat, Esq., Michael Linskey, Emily Rohlffs, and Zachary Kahan

Upwards of 240 AACAP members and family advocates came together on April 14-15, 2016, to unite for positive change in children’s mental health. Overall, this year’s attendees had over 40 scheduled face-to-face meetings directly with Members of Congress, hundreds of meetings with Congressional staff, and over 50 family and youth advocates ready to lobby for change. All this set a new AACAP record!

The well-organized conference opened on Thursday, April 14, 2016, with an hour-long Resident, Newcomer, and Family Orientation. Those attending the orientation learned everything from the layout of Capitol Hill to the basics of the legislative process. Everyone was duly impressed with how quickly and smoothly the presentation progressed from the simple to the complex. By design, the session achieved its goal of making everyone comfortable in conveying AACAP’s issues to lawmakers.

Taking their new found advocacy background to the next level, attendees then participated in a two-hour Special Advocacy Training. Led by AACAP Director of Government Affairs and Clinical Practice Ronald Szabat, participants learned real-time advocacy strategies and mastered new skills (e.g., bridging to a topic at hand) through a series of audience-participation mock congressional visits. Laughter and real learning were hallmarks of this fun and interactive session.

This exciting day was capped off by AACAP’s annual Legislative Conference Reception where AACAP leaders recognized Representative Chris Collins (R-NY) and Scott Dziengelski of Representative Tim Murphy’s (R-PA) office as AACAP’s 2016 Friends of Children’s Mental Health Award recipients. Throughout 2016, these two incredible individuals have demonstrated their desire, knowledge, and passion for improving our nation’s mental health system. Rep. Collins introduced H.R. 1859, the “Ensuring Children’s Access to Specialty Care Act,” which would make surgical corrections to the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) to allow pediatric subspecialists, including child and adolescent psychiatrists, to be eligible for the NHSC loan relief program. It would also list children and adolescents as an underserved population. As Legislative Director to Rep. Murphy, Mr. Dziengelski was principally responsible for technical drafting negotiations surrounding the Congressman’s landmark mental health reform bill.

On Friday morning, attendees were deeply versed in the details of the legislative goals for improving children’s mental health. Conference participants focused on specific ways in which federal law must change to address the current shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists. Right now, nearly every state has a severe shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists, with the majority of counties in the United States having zero. Conference attendees also learned and stressed the importance of including key federal regulatory language, such as “serious emotional disturbance” and specific references to “child and adolescent psychiatrists” in all major mental health reform bills. Without these simple key terms, children, and child and adolescent
psychiatrists would not be eligible for or included in federal funding and programmatic activities through needed legislative change.

H.R. 1859 and S. 2782, the “Ensuring Children’s Access to Specialty Care Act,” are imperative for improving America’s child and adolescent psychiatrists workforce. Heads were nodding in agreement as attendees learned that the average wait-time to see a child and adolescent psychiatrist is over 7.5 weeks and that the actual need for child and adolescent psychiatrists almost quadruples the current supply. The goals of this legislation are to bring pediatric subspecialty fellows or trainees within the NHSC loan relief eligibility, list children as an underserved population for needed medical services, and ensure that pediatric subspecialty training sites and programs meet NHSC loan relief criteria.

Attendees also made a plea for co-sponsorship and support of Rep. Murphy’s H.R. 2646, the “Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act.” Among a series of policy changes to fix America’s broken mental health system, this comprehensive mental health legislation would establish a new assistant secretary for Mental Health and Substance Abuse Disorders. The bill aims to immediately address intergovernmental coordination of mental health services and programs, which is badly needed. In large part due to AACAP’s successful Legislative Conference and effective advocacy, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed H.R. 2646 on July 6 by a vote of 422-2.

H.R. 2646, H.R. 1859, and S. 2782 all have the requisite key wording of “serious emotional disturbance,” child and adolescent psychiatrist references, and NHSC workforce provisions to ensure that children and child and adolescent psychiatrists have access and eligibility to programmatic activity. As attendees learned, not all comprehensive mental health bills are comprehensive, as some do not have the needed wording to guarantee that programs and funds flow to children and child and adolescent psychiatrists.

AACAP is very proud of its advocacy by members, family, and youth. The conference was tremendously productive and successful in advancing children’s mental health. If you wish to review AACAP’s 2016 Legislative Priorities in more depth, contact a member of AACAP’s Government Affairs team at gov@aacap.org.

Missed the conference this year or ready for the next AACAP wave to take our messages to Capitol Hill? Then mark your calendars now to attend next year’s Conference – May 11-12, 2017!