

I am thankful to CAPSGW for awarding me the Early Career Educational Grant. Typically, in the past this grant was used to help with travel costs to attend a conference. However, as we are all aware, the COVID-19 pandemic had put a stop to in-person conferences during this past year. Many conferences, though, were still held virtually. As an entering second year child and adolescent psychiatry fellow, advocacy has continued to become the heart of my focus. I have always had a passion for advocacy, and one could say that actually began when I was in first grade in elementary school. Indeed, after school there was a fight occurring between older fifth grade boys, and I decided I was going to break this up. I have no actual recollection of this event, and my grandmother would love to tell this story since she was the one who pulled me out of the chaos. That fiery, outspoken, and wanting to fight for what is right little girl is now only more prepared, professional, and even more dedicated to advocating for children and adolescents, particularly within the field of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. In the words of John Quincy Adams, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader". While I have always tried to advocate for each individual patient of mine, I was privileged to attend this year's AACAP Legislative Conference to learn how to advocate on a larger and more generally impactful level.

This year's AACAP Legislative Conference was held virtually. It consisted of two days: the first being a full day of training on how to advocate, how to speak with legislators, and how to make main, important points within the few, at times, minutes allotted to present your message. This first day was also utilized to introduce the main agenda's conference points which included increasing access to child and adolescent psychiatrists, improving mental health services for students, and providing equitable mental health care in minority communities. Those three loaded and targeted issues are the crux of what is needed to improve mental health care and treatment during today's crucial times.

Starting my journey to become a child and adolescent psychiatrist by receiving my Master of Public Health degree in Epidemiology, my thesis was on the differences in health outcomes in pediatric cancers across different races. It isn't news to anyone that along those same lines, outcomes in mental health are also different based on race and socioeconomic status. These differences have become essential to focus on, particularly as suicide rates and inpatient mental health treatment rates for those under 18yo increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has put mental health on the forefront of people's minds, and this is where it needs to stay. Isolation in the year 2020 was not a choice, but a necessity, and in fact an order. However, jobs were subsequently lost, families were fractured, and friendships were put on-hold. To think that these abrupt changes would not negatively affect mental health as a whole would be ludicrous. The question then becomes is how do we start to work toward improving these statistics, and more importantly, helping the lives of the people behind the numbers. One strong step is advocacy: advocacy on all levels. Advocacy may start with petitioning a school to have your patient obtain an IEP for a mental health illness, to improving the hygienic practices offered to the psychiatric emergency department patients awaiting involuntary placement (as I worked toward during

my residency), to speaking with a senator about passing a bill to create opportunities for minorities to have access to equitable mental health care.

On the final day of the legislative conference, I had the opportunity to attend meetings with senators and representatives from the House to advocate for the passing of bills targeted toward the three main points above. This day was invigorating. Each person in my virtual meetings took turns discussing points close to their hearts, their psychiatric practices, and to them as individuals and to psychiatry as a whole. To hear so many child and adolescent psychiatrists with similar passions as my own, and to speak of personal stories about where and how the system as we know it failed them and their patients, and to make points about how we as a society can move to making great impact to improving mental health care and treatment to all who need it. That day was meaningful and priceless, and a start to a hopefully strong and determined advocacy journey ahead of me. Thank you again to CAPSGW for awarding me the Early Educational Career Grant. Since I did not utilize this money to attend a conference, I utilized it to purchase educational materials to strengthen my depth and breadth of psychiatric knowledge. Again, thank you for this wonderful opportunity.

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