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AFMRD FAMILY MEDICINE ADVOCACY SUMMIT ESSAY

Washington D.C. is truly an incredible place. This is a city where things get done and where real life changes are happening right in front of your eyes. Without surprise, the AAFP Family Medicine Advocacy Summit (FMAS) was held in this perfect city to ignite passion and affect change.

My experience started with the AFMRD Advocacy dinner where I met with the 8 other scholarship recipients. It was really interesting to hear stories from other residents about their family medicine residency programs and experiences. This in itself was very rewarding. Many residents voiced concerns they had about their programs, attendings, policies, benefits, and downfalls over the past year. I think a lof of us bonded over the similar trials and tribulations our programs were going through. For instance, I voiced my concerns over how our program had gone through ACGME probation when I first started my residency training and how currently, we are struggling with losing an intern position and also the sale of our hospital. I felt a sense of comradery and had several residents at the dinner also share similar stories which in the end helped to relieve a lot of anxiety. We also spent a lot of time discussing the field of family medicine in general and what outside factors had an influence on our field. A lot of insight was gained just by hearing colleagues at a similar stage voice where they thought family medicine and healthcare as a whole was going. I finished dinner feeling very full and content after a couple hours and prepared for a full day to come.

The next day I got up bright and early, gathered breakfast from downstairs near the conference room, and was surprised to see that I wasn’t going to be sitting with all of the other residents that I had just met. This made me instantly a bit nervous because I had no clue who those 10 people at my “Texas” table were! So pointer #1, know that after the AFMRD scholarship dinner, you are going to have a whole new group of friends to meet and spend your time with. I did not spend hardly any more time with the other residents I had previously met because I was the only recipient from Texas.

So, with my plate full of goodies, I walked to my Texas table where about 10 other people greeted me. The majority of people I met were practicing physicians scattered over Texas who had all united for a common goal: advocating on Capitol Hill. Pointer #2: When I applied for the AFMRD Advocacy Scholarship, I’m not 100% sure I realized what I was getting myself into. I think I primarily thought I was going to be learning about advocacy, not necessarily advocating personally on Capitol Hill! So, be aware that with this scholarship, you will actually talking to representatives who can make a change, so what you say matters. The reason I point this out, is not to discourage anyone from applying because you’ll personally be talking to people on Capitol Hill; I point this out because I was a little caught off guard instantly nervous and this pointer will help to prevent that. I will get to my experience about advocating soon, but as a preview, this was an incredible opportunity that I did not initially realize would be so rewarding and I am beyond thankful that I applied for this scholarship.

Many of the physicians at my table had been coming to Capitol Hill for over 10 years with the goal of furthering family medicine’s cause. I felt very lucky to get to learn from these physicians. Amongst them was the president-elect of Texas Medical Association, so meeting him was amazing. I was very humbled to get to spend a large majority of my time with him and be taught about so many things I was clueless about. Another person I felt very lucky to meet was the current CEO of Texas Academy of Family Physicians. He also spent a lot of time discussing issues with me and teaching me about countless subjects. There were several physicians that were in their first 5 years of post-residency working and I really enjoyed talking to them about what life was like post-residency. Pointer #3: Networking is invaluable. Take advantage of this opportunity and meet everyone you can because you’ll never know what that can lead to. Plus, you can learn a lot from the people sitting at your table.

The format of this day was basically 50-minute sessions where a speaker taught on a subject for about 30 minutes followed by Q&A by conference guests for the next 20 minutes. I’d say there were about 5-6 subjects taught on throughout the day. Some interesting ones I remember were on healthcare reform, physician-focused and advanced payment models, teaching health centers, immunizations for vaccine-preventable diseases, telemedicine, and most importantly, how to lobby and what exactly our congressional asks are. Pointer #4: Congressional asks are basically what you are going to specifically ask a congressman for such as expanding Medicaid or increasing budgets for teaching health centers. Knowing your facts and numbers is critical for this part! I learned a ton about how residency programs were funded and a lot of really interesting facts about family medicine and its’ physicians that I didn’t know before this conference. For example, a recent study states that “If every American made use of primary care, the health care system would see $67 billion in savings annually.” Another thing I learned is that family medicine physicians generate a nationwide economic impact of more than $46 billion per year. Very important as well is Title VII expansion which directly affects primary care funding. It’s estimated that by 2035, our population in the United States will require an additional 33, 000 practicing primary care physicians.

The later part of the afternoon is spent with your state delegates, planning for the next day, Capitol Hill Day. At this time, we were divided up in two groups and we went over who was scheduled for which visit with each representative or senator and we came up with a game plan about the most important topics to discuss with each person. Then we all chatted for a bit, got ready for dinner, and departed to a restaurant that our leader had picked out. Dinner was wonderful and the company was great. My husband came with me to this part and we really had a fun time getting to know everyone. This was much needed before what I assumed was a very stressful day to come.

The next morning, I met with my group in the lobby and we all started our walk over to Capitol Hill. I had about five people that I was set to meet with and I was in a group of about 3-5 people for many of these visits. From what I understand, you typically meet with a secretary representing the actual representative or senator. This makes sense because on my set list of people that I was “supposed” to meet, was the former Republican presidential candidate, Senator Ted Cruz, and I was going to be completely shocked if I got this opportunity. To my surprise, I actually did get to meet him. For my very first visit, I waited about an hour and stayed with one other person from my group, and I actually got to take a picture with Ted Cruz and talk to him about our healthcare issues for about five minutes. My partner I was with said this interaction was pretty unheard of and she told me this was probably her most memorable experience from the past 10 years. So Pointer #5: Go in with the expectation that you will not meet with anyone high up on Capitol Hill, BUT, know that there’s always a chance! After this wonderful experience, I also got to meet with my state representatives, Gene Green, Pete Sessions, and Jeb Hensarling, all of which provided for both intellectual and entertaining conversations. I did get the opportunity to recite a lot of the numbers, statistics, and figures that I had learned the previous day, but I was surprised that probably half of the time was spent on topics outside of healthcare…lots of politics and talking about personal issues. Pointer #6: I felt that the politicians that I met with cared just as much, if not more, about who I was as a person and where I came from and what my interests were, over my healthcare issues that I was prepared to present.

All in all, the day went really well and I had a blast. I learned so much and felt so happy to have gotten this opportunity. It’s a scary thing going to DC and talking to high up politicians about healthcare. But for my Pointer #7: Know that this day is not as near intimidating as you will assume. I was very nervous about how Capitol Hill Day would go, but I became at ease because I had several other people by my side for the discussions and I also got to spend a lot of time just conversing about light-hearted topics. I wish someone had told me how easy and fun this day would be.

In conclusion, all I can say are great things about this experience. I did not know fully what I was getting myself into, but I feel so lucky for being chosen for this opportunity. I learned a lot, made really incredible connections, and felt proud of myself for trying something new and intimidating and I ultimately feel like I made a difference. What more could I have asked for?! I definitely hope to be back next year!