

[ETSU Social Work Policy Podcast with Peter Stein: Policy Analysis](#)

Cory Whitfield: Well greetings everyone, my name is Cory Whitfield here for our social work policy podcast at East Tennessee State University. And here today we have Mr. Peter Stein. He is the senior policy adviser for Congresswoman Diana Harshbarger. Us as social workers being that we do have this relationship with our clients in the community and we see what they're going through on a daily basis, how can we build that relationship with yourself and Congresswoman Harshbarger so we can make a change because my client is essentially your client?

Peter Stein: I think that the first step is one that you've taken Cory, reaching out to the member's offices, to the staff that might cover those issues to try to establish a relationship, introduce yourselves, and let them know that you're very dedicated to your field and to the people you serve. And you would love to serve as a resource to policymakers in Congress, as they write and pass laws, but also the other side of the equation, which is implementing those laws through regulations. I think staying involved, keeping up to speed with what's taking place in both Washington and the state and local levels is a key ingredient of that. So being versed in the policies that are affecting your clients and the populations that you serve. If there's one thing that's true in Washington it's that almost every profession has a stakeholder representation association, National Association of Social Workers, for example. Becoming a member for your own professional education and continuing education and edification, but also many of those organizations engaged in advocacy, and they have folks who will be advocates on the ground, maybe here in the Washington, D.C., area where they can provide you resources for information, for talking points, for ways to interact with your members of Congress,

Cory Whitfield: One of the main tenets of social work is advocacy. To you, what is, like, effective strategies for advocacy?

Peter Stein: I think that social media is increasingly becoming an important element and component of advocacy. But it really is, in my view, and I think a lot of folks' views, a multi-pronged approach. So, you know, coordinating whatever messages you have for your policymakers, for your elected officials, not just say in the social media realm, but also having those, making those, making your voices in your presence known and heard back home in the district, trying to see if you can arrange some time with the member or their staff back there in the district in person. I think emails and phone calls are key. I think, if you can do virtual meetings like these, are key. I think those speak volumes to putting the personal face and the personal touch on what issues you're advocating and you're seeking to amplify before policymakers. Another element can be, you know, coordinated events to put on some in addition social media, but other traditional, maybe advertising in local papers that, believe me, members of Congress like Congressman Harshbarger, they very much pay attention to. And inviting them to, maybe, one of your annual events back in the district, where they could maybe be a keynote speaker to open up an event and maybe serve on a panel to talk about the issues that are important to you, that type of thing. So, it really is multi-pronged. and the more that you make it unique and distinct, I think the more impactful it is. I mean, we do get lots of, say, email campaigns that, you know, they're very much almost identical emails on a certain issue, which is great. Some of them are pre-written, but I think the more you can put your own personal touches onto a communication with your members of Congress, I think that's always helpful.

Cory Whitfield: You know, Peter, you just gave some really wonderful tips. I know a lot of attention is focused on what goes on in Washington and with federal legislation, but could you tell us how legislation on the municipal and state level impacts policy on the federal level?

Peter Stein: Sure. Well, I think one of the things that a good representative and congresswoman Harshbarger strives to do is to maintain good, close relationships with the leaders at the state and local levels. And so having a feel for what's taking place there on the ground, a lot of that may overlap with some of the work that Congress does in its annual appropriations and a lot of times, the appropriations bills that Congress is supposed to pass every year to fund the federal government, well part of that funding also involves helping with community projects back in the districts. So, we regularly, and almost every member of Congress and Senate office, will routinely have relationships and have meetings with those leaders at the state, local, and municipal level. And they may have projects that they are seeking some federal assistance with to match, maybe some federal dollars with their own dollars, with maybe private foundations, and a wide array of different funding sources. So that can mean bridges, that can mean parks, that can be a new wing at ETSU, something that they want to, they think is a worthy project, they think is of great value to the community, and to the extent that they can make a compelling case with it being a cost-effective investment of taxpayer dollars, I think those are key elements as to how members of Congress, like Congresswoman Harshbarger, look to be of assistance, try to steer federal dollars to worthy community projects back in their local areas.

Cory Whitfield: Wonderful. So, Peter, let me just throw this out there at you, let me paint a picture for you. So, I have a wonderful idea. How does a thought, or well-formulated idea, become legislation?

Peter Stein: Ideas for legislation can really come from anywhere and anything. I mean, it can be an idea from a constituent group, a group of students like there in your class, in ETSU. It could be a local press or national press story where you often see these investigative stories, where they uncover some sort of blatant inequity or travesty or misuse of taxpayer dollars, or a particular problem that's going on regionally or nationally. So, the ideas come from almost anywhere and everywhere. Largely the process of gaining a member of Congress' attention to the importance, making a case as to why this issue is important and compelling, being able to make a rational argument and backing it up by good, timely, and objective data all go into the recipe of that PowerPoint, Corey, you were talking about, pitching your idea. Once say the staff of a member of Congress, and the member, or the senator, after meeting and studying an issue, might think it's a good idea, what they would typically do is they would typically take that and draft that into legislative language. And your folks may be familiar, may not be, but I'd encourage you to become familiar with just the basics of how a bill is written. And there's a public access service so that all Americans can see what bills are being introduced and what they say and what stage they're at. If they've passed this or that, if it's been approved or passed into law. Congress.gov. So www.congress.gov where it's a storehouse of all federal legislative activity in Congress. And so, any bill, I mean, then there's, let me tell you, there's easily five or six thousand bills introduced each and every Congress. And they run the gamut. They run the gamut from environment, to agriculture, to healthcare, to mental health and substance abuse, to defense issues, to foreign affairs, etc., etc. So, what the member of Congress with their staff would do would be to draft that into legislative language and then formally introduce it. Typically, they'd like to try to get other members of Congress to join as co-sponsors to the bill, which is them basically lending their name, saying, "I agree with it. I want to be associated with this bill." So, co-sponsors for maybe folks on your side of the aisle or bipartisan co-sponsorship, from the other side of the aisle. And then the typical process of a bill becoming a law would be, the bill through having advocates like yourself help, to press members, to co-

sponsor and bring it to through the legislative process. The bill would typically be referred to a committee of jurisdiction where those committees, they specialize in that particular subject area and they may hold hearings on it, and they may hold what's called a markup, where they formally consider it and maybe make some changes. Technical changes or maybe somewhat larger changes. And then from the committee, they will either report it out of committee or not report it out of committee. If they don't report it out of committee, usually they don't. They think it's not such a great idea at this point in time. If they do report it favorably out of committee, that's usually an indication that they would like to see that bill come to the floor of the House or the Senate for a vote. That would be the kind of the process to tee up these bills, you know, from kind of introduction to possible passage from that chamber. And then of course, the House and the Senate both have to pass a bill in identical form, before it would be sent to the president for consideration of signing into law.

Cory Whitfield: And thank you very much for explaining that. That was a great explanation. So, the next question is, what is deemed as being a conservative legislative body in Tennessee that sometimes conflicts with social work values, how can Tennessee's social workers work alongside the Tennessee legislative body to make change?

Peter Stein: That's a great question. I think that one of the things that of the maybe more conservative mindset of lawmakers, and perhaps policymakers, is the belief that although social programs and safety nets, for example, serve a valuable role in helping to keep folks from slipping through the cracks and to help them to be as, I think, self-sufficient as possible. I think one of the things that folks in your field should always be looking to emphasize is angles, and also thoughts and ideas is how programs can work better is ensuring that folks understand that, say, for example, safety net programs or income security, whether it be through Medicaid or other things that ideally, they're set up to be temporary in nature. Not temporary, that the government would just go on funding them, but we want folks to have that safety net there for when they need it, but ideally giving them the tools so they can move up and then improve their lives so they can be fulfilled and live as maybe not so dependent on, say, government programs. And I think that's something that more conservative lawmakers and policymakers are interested in hearing- the value of those kinds of tenets and aspects of the types of services and programs it serves, the vulnerable populations that you all serve. Not to say that there aren't going to be like, you know, people with substance abuse or mental health issues, those are going to be probably long, long term issues and programs like that. What I'm talking about is being seen more as separate and distinct from, say, income support, typically you think of anti-poverty programs or along those lines. So I think that, you know, we want to ideally think of the safety net as being there for people who need it most, but also creating those opportunities, an opportunity in society for people to not only get their jobs, but also being able to put some savings away, to build a little nest egg to become, if possible, to be, you know, to have those opportunities that folks who are not struggling, who are not facing those same difficulties may have.

Cory Whitfield: Basically, empowering your constituents. Perfect. Well, thank you so very much, Peter. I will definitely be reaching out to you again.