

## National Family Summit, 2023: Advocacy Break Out Session

### **Presenters:**

Dave Bleich, Congressional Liaison Specialist, DEA

Kevin Meara, Founder, City of Angels

Sandy Snodgrass, CEO, AK Fentanyl Response, Bruce's Law

**Overview:** This session covered the importance of engaging with congress to raise awareness, enact legislation, and effect change. Below are case studies on how change was made in the substance use realm, followed by advice for impactful change.

### **Dave Bleich**

Dave shared his experience in working with Chuck Grassley. There was a constituent who had a son who took K-2, a synthetic cannabinoid and within 15 minutes became agitated, and later that night committed suicide. The autopsy said there were no drugs in his system as they didn't know what to look for since K-2 was not a scheduled drug.

They began fact gathering phase, the family discovered this cannabinoid was being sold in gas stations and malls, so the family wanted to testify to congress to ban the chemical compound being sold.

They spoke with DEA and ONCP, and to the media to get the attention of congress.

Dave explained the legislative process and expectation of timelines in getting bills passed. He also explained the current state of affairs that helped get the bill passed, which consisted of getting the attention of various policymakers through their own constituents, and help influence their mind via the media.

### **Main Takeaways:**

- Coalition building is important in wanting to make change. There are strengths in numbers.
- Public Engagement: the family was brave enough to share their story with the masses. With this, the advice is for people who want to facilitate advocacy for change, to be aware that there will be criticism in sharing your story publicly.
- Persistence: there will be setbacks, but being persistent in times of defeat is important.
- Social Media: social media was critical in sharing their story.
- Meetings with policymakers: try to get on your policymaker's agenda so that you can share your story.
- Understand the legislative process. For those who are running for office again, strategize how you can use media and storytelling help get your cause a priority for their election.
- Clerks are your friend and can help with drafting legislation.

### **Kevin Meara, City of Angels:**

Kevin and his wife lost their son to a heroin overdose and decided to start a nonprofit called City of Angels (2008) in New Jersey to help families find resources for their loved ones, so they don't have to endure what they went through. In his words, "To help people get help."

#### **Main Takeaways:**

- When you have a message to share, make sure it's clear and simple. Don't make a mess of your mission.
- "Passion without evidence isn't effective, and evidence alone isn't sufficient."
- Build your network of representatives who have been impacted.
- Focus on one issue versus more than one.
- Work in a coalition so there is strength in your message.
- Look for the inroads for change. Where are they?
- Know the process of the change you want to make.
- Get personal, share your story!
- Follow up with your contacts. Send them personal notes and thank yous. This is very important.
- Participate in whatever panels, workshops, etc. you can to get your word out.
- Remember that your word is all you have in this space. The work you do will help you build credibility.
- Take care of your own house, make sure you are taking care of yourself before taking on advocacy.
- Always have hope. If you can still smile while doing this work, then there is hope, and you will bring that hope to others.

### **Sandy Snodgrass, Bruce's Law**

The bill, called Bruce's Law, seeks to educate the public about synthetic opioids through an awareness campaign, a federal working group and community-based grants.

Sandy was able to connect with Alaskan representatives to share her son's story. During her time with them, she made sure to send thank you cards to everyone she met with, and left a framed picture of her son so they can remember there is a human behind this initiative.

#### **Take aways:**

- Always say thank you. Be kind to People.
- In this game of advocacy, your name is your brand. Remember this as this is important.
- Your advocacy keeps your loved ones alive.
- If someone cannot help you in your objective of change, ask them to point and connect you to someone who can.
- Ask your contact on what you can do to be helpful to them.

### **Overall takeaways from Advocacy:**

- Equip yourself with facts. Do your research to make sure you know what you are talking about. Use credible facts to underscore your message.
- Take care of yourself, your house, and make sure you are healing.
- Create a clear message of what you want to change. Don't make a mess of your message.
- Build your network and connect with coalitions.
- Connect with policy makers with personal ties to your cause.
- Strengthen your message with others.
- Focus on one issue.
- Understand your inroads. Where are they?
- Know your change process. Know your local, state, and federal processes.
- Follow up with your contacts, say thank you often.
- Your name and your work are your brand and credibility. Use it wisely.
- Find common ground.
- Be persistent. Change does not happen overnight. There will be setbacks, always be sure to be kind and patient.