2016 Hepatitis on the Hill: Calls for an Urgent National Response

March 14, 2016 By NASTAD

Over 100 grassroots advocates from 27 states participated in the 2016 Hepatitis on the Hill event in Washington, DC March 6-8. Participants received advocacy training, met with officials from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Division of Viral Hepatitis (DVH) and conducted over 100 educational Hill visits with staffers of key Members of Congress! NASTAD was pleased to be a sponsor of the event and many NASTAD staff participated in the planning, scheduling and serving as team leads for Hill visits.

Hepatitis on the Hill, organized by the Hepatitis Appropriations Partnership (HAP), Hep B United (HBU), and the National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable (NVHR), was launched in 2015 after many years of advocacy efforts to increase the urgency and national response to hepatitis B (HBV) and C (HCV). Hepatitis on the Hill provided a platform for constituents and individuals living with hepatitis B or C to meet with their Congressional offices and advocate for resources to meet the needs of people impacted by hepatitis. To amplify the voices of people living with and at risk of HBV and HCV, and ensure representation of communities most impacted by hepatitis, organizers provided scholarships to over 50 participants.

The event included training on the Congressional appropriations process, effectively sharing how hepatitis has impacted participants' lives, the current state of hepatitis prevention, testing and access to care in their states, and specific requests for Congressional action, including:

- Increasing funding for the CDC Division of Viral Hepatitis to respond to hepatitis B and C across the nation
- Supporting the use of federal funds for syringe services programs
- Learning more about how hepatitis B and C are impacting constituents in their state

Participants had the opportunity to hear from Dr. John Ward, Director, CDC DVH on the CDC's hepatitis priorities, how they would use additional funding, and the shared desire to eliminate hepatitis B and C in the U.S. (and globally). Dr. Rich Wolitski, Acting Director and Corinna Dan, Viral Hepatitis Policy Advisor from the HHS Office of HIV/AIDS and Infectious Disease Policy (OHAIDP) also discussed with participants the planned update of the HHS Viral Hepatitis Action

Plan, and sought input on the most important issues faced across the nation. Event organizers and participants are grateful that federal partners welcomed the opportunity to engage in ongoing discussion with stakeholders from across the nation as we collectively work to most effectively address the prevention and care and treatment needs of people at risk of or living with hepatitis B and C.

Event organizers are also grateful to Senator Mazie Hirono (HI), Senator Mark Kirk (IL), Congresswoman Judy Chu (CA), Congressman Hank Johnson (GA) and Congressman Charlie Dent (PA) for welcoming participants and for their ongoing efforts to increase the national response to the hepatitis epidemics.

Hepatitis on the Hill and the over 50 scholarships provided to participants would not have been possible without the generous financial support of AbbVie, Gilead Sciences, Inc., Merck, NASTAD, National Task Force on Hepatitis B: Focus on Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, and NVHR.

We hope that grassroots advocates will continue to engage with policymakers at the local, state and federal level after they return home from Washington, DC. NASTAD and our advocacy partners will continue to call on Congress and the Administration for a more urgent response to these epidemics. We believe that the experiences and voices of those most impacted by hepatitis B and C are critical to convince policymakers to invest adequate funding to prevent, treat, cure and eventually eliminate hepatitis B and C!

In addition to coordinating HAP and sponsoring Hepatitis on the Hill, NASTAD advocates for increased hepatitis funding and resources for governmental public health programs throughout the year. Policy and Legislative Affairs staff participate in multiple hepatitis and HIV advocacy coalitions, conduct NASTAD specific Hill visits, and accompany health department hepatitis and HIV staff on educational Hill visits throughout the year, including during the NASTAD Annual Meeting and the NASTAD National Hepatitis Technical Assistance Meeting.

NASTAD coordinates the Hepatitis Appropriations Partnership (HAP) which is a national coalition based in Washington, DC and includes community-based organizations, public health and provider associations, national hepatitis and HIV organizations, and diagnostic, pharmaceutical and bio-technology companies. HAP works with policy makers and public health officials to increase federal support for hepatitis prevention, testing, education, research and treatment.

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