Advocacy News

Advocacy Action

We often hear the question, “Does advocacy really work?” One of the best examples of advocacy in action is represented by just one patient. Jeff Haaga is a resident of the state of Utah, and while trying to access bariatric surgery, he hit a stumbling block - the procedure wasn’t covered under his insurance. But that stumbling block wasn’t enough to stop Jeff. Below, Jeff tells his remarkable story of how he continues to fight for something for which he strongly believes.

By Jeff Haaga

I have always been politically active in my community and volunteered for many efforts.

In 2003, my brother had gastric bypass. I was impressed that he lost 150 pounds with the surgery. Of course, over time, we all (my siblings) have lost hundreds of pounds and gained the weight back plus more. We were not obese as children; therefore, why all my siblings and I have a predisposition for weight gain is unknown. This procedure showed us hope in a longer life free from the disease of obesity.

I began to study the surgery and consulted my doctor. After much meditation, I decided to proceed to have my surgery authorized by our health insurance company. I never thought for one minute they would not cover the operation since they were spending thousands yearly to maintain treatment for my co-morbidities. But, I was wrong.

In Utah, it is a law that insurance providers offer you two levels of appeal. My first appeal was before a small board handpicked by the CEO of the insurance company in July 2006. I felt I had made my case in a humbling way in front of people that all were of normal weight. Of course, the denial came in the mail citing the written exclusion without any empathy for my situation.

I decided to appeal to the CEO and the board in September 2006 and prepared data and a presentation to explain my position. I entered a room with some of my peers and some that I have worked with on other political issues. It was again a humbling meeting where I practically begged for help. I do remember the CEO asking me what I would do if I was denied and I simply said, “activism.” What I learned on the OAC Web site informed me on ways I could take a proactive step in advocating for my health and care.

TAKING ACTION

As a marketer, I ran Steve Mascaro’s re-election campaign that fall. I had a lunch with him after his victory and I asked him if he would run a bill on morbid obesity. I never thought I could write state legislation. I studied other states that passed or are in the process, and decided to write the legislation.

I have been involved in government for many years and understood it would be a long process. Interestingly, once the legislation was published, the interest in morbid obesity seemed high. People began to call and ask to help or tell me how their life changed by treatment and others in tears having been denied.

I decided to set up the Utah Obesity Coalition and get organized. You need to have the realization that it might not only help you, but others too. When you have multiple voices sounding your chorus you can accomplish many things. I recognized the strengths we had in the tens of thousands of people that were post-operative. I knew it would be hard for others like me to stand up publicly and fight with the stigma of obesity being so painful. I solicited the forum groups on obesity and asked for help. Most of these people were post-operative patients who lost hundreds of pounds and were seeking ways to help others stay strong. While the other individuals I found were still fighting their disease but were willing to write letters. In two short months, I had thousands of people writing our legislature asking them to support the bill HB225.

We have had our setbacks with the legislation, but we are determined to proceed. Our goals will be to financially organize so we can legally ask for funds to target legislators with a marketing campaign to support our new proposed legislation for 2008. Senator Chris Buttar said, “You have a huge education process in front of you.” We will, with his help, proceed with the legislation and ask constituents of those legislators to support the 2008 bill to help us communicate the message. It will take time, but in time we will have success.
About the OAC
The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a non-profit patient organization dedicated to educating and advocating on behalf of those affected by obesity, morbid obesity and childhood obesity. The OAC distributes balanced and comprehensive patient educational materials and advocacy tools.

The OAC believes that patients should first be educated about obesity and its treatments and also encourages proactive patient advocacy. The OAC focuses its advocacy efforts on helping patients gain access to the treatments for morbid obesity. As a membership organization, the OAC was formed to bring patients together to have a voice with issues affecting their lives and health. To learn more about the OAC, visit [www.obesityaction.org](http://www.obesityaction.org) or contact us at (800) 717-3117.

OAC Resources
The OAC provides numerous beneficial resources for patients, as well as professionals. All OAC resources are complimentary and may be ordered in bulk. To request materials, please contact the OAC National Office at (800) 717-3117 or send an email to info@obesityaction.org.

Newsletters
- Obesity Action Alert - the OAC’s free monthly electronic newsletter
- OAC News - OAC’s quarterly education and advocacy newsletter

Brochures/Guides
- Are you living with Obesity?
- Advocacy Primer: Your Voice Makes a Difference
- BMI Chart
- OAC Insurance Guide
- State-specific Advocacy Guides
- Understanding Obesity Series
  - Understanding Obesity Brochure
  - Understanding Obesity Poster
  - Understanding Morbid Obesity Brochure
  - Understanding Childhood Obesity Brochure
  - Understanding Childhood Obesity Poster

OAC Membership

The OAC was founded as the “patient voice” in obesity. As a membership organization, the OAC exists to represent the needs and interests of those affected by obesity and provide balanced and comprehensive education and advocacy resources. Membership in the OAC is integral in strengthening the voice of the millions affected by obesity. Various membership levels are available and each is accompanied with several valuable benefits such as:

- Official membership card/certificate
- Annual subscription to OAC News – OAC’s quarterly educational and advocacy newsletter
- Subscription to Obesity Action Alert – monthly e-newsletter distributed on the 1st of each month
- Access to valuable educational resources and tools
- Patient representation through advocacy, in addition to information on advocacy issues concerning patients

Yes! I would like to join the OAC’s efforts. I would like to join as a/an:
- Patient/Family Member: $20
- Professional Member: $50
- Physician Member: $100
- Surgeon Member: $150
- Institutional Member*: $500 (Surgery centers, doctors’ offices, weight-loss centers, etc.)
- OAC Chairman’s Council*: $1,000 +

* These membership levels have exclusive benefits.

Name: ________________________________
Company: ____________________________
Address: ______________________________
City: _______ State: ______ Zip: _______
Phone: __________________ Email: ___________

Payment Information
Enclosed is my check (payable to the OAC) for $ _______.
Please charge my credit card for my membership fee:
- Discover®
- MasterCard®
- Visa®
- Amex®

Credit Card Number: ___________________
Expiration Date: __________ Billing Zip Code: _______

Mail to: OAC
4511 North Himes Ave., Ste. 250
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Or Fax to: (813) 873-7838