

# 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 comorbidities. 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 OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

## LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

### Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
  - Community Discussion Forum
  - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



**JOIN TODAY: GO TO [OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN](http://OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN)**

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