

AgingToday

the bimonthly newspaper of the American Society on Aging

ISSN: 1043-1284
www.agingtoday.org

Page 1

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2012
volume xxxiii number 1

To affect policy, you must know policy

By **Paul Nathanson**

Although the legislative process is always important, effective advocacy on the federal level is about more than moving Congress to act. Effective advocacy to affect social change in the 21st century needs to include an ability to influence the administrative and regulatory apparatus, too.

Recently, I moderated a session on language access at the Grantmakers In Aging annual conference in McLean, Va. There I had the pleasure of introducing a remarkable Cambodian immigrant who has volunteered time in his Philadelphia community to help other elderly Cambodians understand their benefits.

The subtext of Mr. Our's remarks before a packed house of funders was that few, if any, materials from federal or state agencies, or private insurance plans, are accessible to Cambodians. Such barriers affect millions of other older immigrants, refugees and asylees with limited English-language proficiency.

To address one aspect of this language access issue, the National Senior Citizens Law Center (NSCLC) used regulatory comments to influence the rule-making process for people with limited English proficiency. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) had issued a proposed rule that would have forced Medicare plans to translate materials only for languages where a given geographical service area's population reached at least 10 percent. NSCLC asked advocates nationwide to seek a 5 percent threshold instead. As a result of the outpouring of support for the recommended change, CMS listened and changed the threshold.

Similarly, the power of stories can affect how policy makers think about and work to create social change. Our *LGBT Older Adults in Long Term Care Facilities: Stories from the Field* led to a meeting called by Assistant Secretary for Aging Kathy Greenlee to discuss concerns outlined in the report and a need to raise awareness in the aging network. And, in Lexington, Ky., a foundation recently created an endowment to ensure better education for nonprofit advocacy organizations about issues raised in the report.

Those with a desire to bring issues affecting elders to policy makers in Washington need to understand federal policy development and the legislative and administrative processes in order to have truly meaningful impact. ■

Paul Nathanson is executive director of the National Senior Citizens Law Center, Washington, D.C.