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SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS LOBBY STATE LEGISLATORS

JUNIORS SPEAK TO DELEGATES AND SENATORS ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE THEY WANT TO SEE.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | March 8, 2023

Read time: about 4 min

Isabella DaCunha, Caroline Burrows and Olivia Smalls never expected to be in a position to speak face-to-face with their legislators about issues that are important to them.

But they, and 17 of their classmates, recently had the chance to do just that.

The three women, who will graduate in '24 with degrees in [social work](#), attended Lobby Day in Richmond. Lobby Day provides junior social work majors with an important opportunity to meet with their representatives and advocate for bills they believe will support those most in need, said Dr. Diane Griffiths, Social Work Program Director.

"This was my first time at Lobby Day, as well as my first time lobbying in general," DaCunha said. "My experience at Lobby Day was an absolute highlight so far in the Christopher Newport Social Work Program, and I would love to have the chance to do it again in the future."



Crystal Beazley (left) and Isabella DaCunha (right) stand with Del. Hyland Franklin "Buddy" Fowler.

"I was incredibly excited about the opportunity because I was able to connect with my legislators and that is a process that I had always been curious about," she said.

DaCunha opted to lobby her delegate about a House bill that would require nursing home facilities to have trained staff and plenty of resources, maintain their infrastructure and provide necessary medical services. After presenting her pitch to legislators, she learned that the bill was passed by both the state Senate and House.

"The primary issue I wanted to bring to the attention of legislators was the issue of elder abuse and elder neglect," she said. "The issue is important to me because I have witnessed elder abuse and elder neglect throughout my childhood from visiting relatives in nursing homes to volunteering with the aging population. The elderly are a significant part of the population that is often overlooked."

At first, DaCunha said, the idea of lobbying was a little daunting and nerve wracking. But, she soon realized there was no reason to be worried.

"In the beginning of Lobby Day, I was incredibly nervous to lobby my legislators. I was afraid they would ignore my input due to the fact I was young and in college. I was also afraid I would stumble on my words or forget my pitch in the middle of presenting," she said. "However, despite it being a required course assignment, I remembered the true reason I was lobbying on this bill and was able to sufficiently convey my pitch to legislators."

The issue Burrows chose for her lobbying efforts was human trafficking awareness for all people licensed by the Board of Medicine in Virginia.

"I currently volunteer with an anti-trafficking organization through the [Bonner Service Scholar](#) program at CNU and see the impacts of human trafficking directly, so any legislation that promotes awareness and education around the issue is something I would support," she said.

For Burrows, the day proved to be a game changer.

"Lobbying and engaging with legislators was an experience that shifted my perspective on social work practice and education," she said. "It was the first real experience that I have had with macro social work, so seeing the way that policy is created and discussed was super interesting."

Smalls' lobbying platform was a bill that focused on mental health and rehabilitative services for veterans.

"Speaking with the legislators about my bill went so well! I did not realize that my delegate and senator were as passionate as I was about military veterans, which was very comforting," Smalls said. "They were very responsive and encouraged me to keep using my voice for military veterans."

"I also learned that my bill was in the process of being passed while we were on our visit. That put a smile on my face," she said.

The lobbying process, Smalls said, turned out to be enlightening.

"Being able to share my views with different people that have the ability to pass the bill felt empowering. It felt like I was able to make a difference and that my voice was heard," Smalls said. "Students learn about the role of advocacy in policy decision-making and the skills needed to effectively engage with their legislators."

In preparation for Lobby Day, the students were required to research bills being considered by the General Assembly and choose one that related to their own personal passions and interests.

"They also researched the backgrounds of their legislators, the key issue represented by the bill, the pros and cons, and the various stakeholder points of view," Griffiths said.

Once the students identified the bills they wanted to focus on, they contacted their legislators to set up in-person meetings to take place on Lobby Day. They also created oral two-minute pitch presentations and one-page advocacy handouts to give to the lawmakers.

The day began for students sitting in on a committee hearing and observing legislators in action.

From there, they headed to the meetings they scheduled with their representatives. During the day, they also met

with a social worker who is chief of staff for a senator and spent time at the Capitol sitting in the House or Senate gallery to get a firsthand glimpse of what happens during legislative proceedings. The students were formally introduced on the House/Senate floor by either a delegate or senator who represents the area that encompasses Christopher Newport.

Griffiths said the day is meant to help students understand the process, build relationships, and get a clearer idea of how legislation can impact social work.

“Students learn that social work at the macro level is highly dependent on building trust and personal relationships,” she said. “It’s very exciting when students are advocating for bills that ultimately get passed into law.”

The students said they were energized and excited by the positive reception they received from their representatives, and from the results that came from their lobbying efforts.

“I have heard that this was uncommon, but my legislators actually asked for my pitch and gave me their full attention. They asked why I was passionate and clear and actively listened to everything I had to say,” Burrows said. “My delegate actually immediately said that he would be happy to support it, which I was surprised by, and then asked me questions about school, life, and my family and home community.”

The day proved to be less daunting and more productive than they expected, the students said.

“Once we got there, I reviewed my notes, put on a smile and the confidence to take on the day came to me automatically and I had a blast,” Smalls said.

“I realized that this is something I really felt comfortable doing and it allowed me to have tough, but good conversations with every individual I came in contact with,” she said. “It was the complete opposite of what I expected. I thought it was going to be yelling and a whole lot of arguing. But none of that happened. It was really stress free and fun!”
