

UNITED SPINAL_{NOW}

Roll on Capitol Hill

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On a 95-degree day, when the humidity was 95 percent, 100 wheelchair users from all over the United States, including Hawaii and Puerto Rico, “rolled” on Capitol Hill. During our Sixth Annual Roll on Capitol Hill, members, clinicians and veterans (from United Spinal’s VetsFirst program) attended a welcome reception upon their arrival in Washington, D.C., met each other and prepared for the grueling but rewarding two days that followed.

From 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. United Spinal made hundreds of appointments for Roll attendees with congressmen and senators and/or their staff members to discuss issues before the Congress that are of vital concern to people with disabilities, especially those using wheelchairs. They were instructed to tell their own personal stories as they discussed legislative initiatives.

After a day spent lobbying, United Spinal hosted a Congressional reception in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. There, members and the D.C. disability community along with some elected officials and congressional staff socialized, talked politics and applauded as United Spinal awarded Rep. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.), Long Island’s own Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-N.Y.) and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.).

Rep. Roe chairs the House Veterans Affairs Committee and was presented with an award for sponsoring the VA Accountability First Act, which incredibly, passed the House on the very day they made their visits. Rep. Roe shepherded this bill through to passage so that the VA could hold employees to performance standards or dismiss them for poor performance.

United Spinal honored Rep. Zeldin for his sponsorship of two bills which, if enacted, will create a separate category for Medicare and Medicaid-provided wheelchairs to ensure the availability of custom, manual and power chairs and accessories (believe it or not, government considers seat cushions, headrests and joysticks to be accessories). Rep. Zeldin’s sponsorship of Complex Rehabilitation Technology (CRT) legislation gives this proposal bi-partisan support.

Incidentally, Freshman Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-N.Y.), also from Long Island, signed on to both bills too. We intend to ask both Congressmen (i.e. Zeldin and Suozzi) to get the whole N.Y. State delegation to sign on.

Disability is not specific to Democrats or Republicans and, unfortunately, for the past 25 years somehow meeting the needs and acknowledging the rights of people with disabilities has gotten caught up in politics. Remember, without Pres. George H. W. Bush’s support, there would be no Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Sen. Warren, who had a staff member accept her award, was recognized for her tenacious support of the Disability Integration Act, which will mandate that individuals eligible for long term care in institutions first be offered the choice to live in the community with supportive services by private insurers and State Medicaid systems.

Sen. Warren sent this message: “I am proud to be fighting alongside all of you for policies like the Disability Integration Act and those that address other disability issues. I want to express my gratitude for the work you’ve done today and every day. Hearing your stories is incredibly important.”

The three-day event energized and motivated members, educated and informed those who work on Capitol Hill and seems to get bigger and better every year.

I reminded the group, as we left, that this is the 49th anniversary of the assassination of Robert Kennedy. In what is a perfect description of grassroots advocacy, he said, “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”