How Should STFM Respond to Political and Societal Issues?

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The Society of Teachers of Family Medicine has always been an organization with a deep sense of social responsibility that has valued diversity of people, ideas, and opinions and discussion of important political and societal issues. With the diversity and passions of its members, the STFM Board is commonly asked to take stands on controversial political or social issues. This has led to some interesting and sometimes spirited discussions among our Board or Executive Committee members.

Arizona Immigration Act
Most recently, we have been asked by several members to consider boycotting Arizona for meetings because of its “Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act,” a law passed earlier this year that targets illegal immigration. The act makes it a crime for an “alien” to be in Arizona without carrying required registration documents in their possession at all times and requires police to determine a person’s immigration status if there is reasonable suspicion that the person is an “illegal alien.” This law has raised human rights concerns over racial and ethnic profiling and has stirred up a large number of protests, with multiple groups boycotting meetings in Arizona. In discussions of this question, it was decided that the STFM Board should both deal with this immediate issue and also develop policy regarding how the Board should respond to this sort of political or social issue.

Professional Associations and Boycotts
The Board during its July meeting reviewed materials regarding how professional associations tend to handle requests to boycott destinations. This in itself is a difficult and controversial topic. On one hand, such boycotts apply economic and social pressure to change policies. On the other hand, the boycott can cause job loss and financial hardship for the very people that it is trying to support. On a practical level, major meetings are generally planned far in advance, with complex contracts that include large financial penalties if the organization cancels the meeting. Many professional associations, including STFM, depend greatly on the revenue from meetings to have a balanced budget and to support the rest of their work, and a loss from this type of penalty could cause a substantial financial hit for the organization.

STFM Policy
After an excellent discussion of the broader question regarding responding to political and social issues, the Board passed the following policy:

Issues of a political or social value nature referred to (or raised with) STFM with a request to take a position will be reviewed by the Executive Committee for appropriateness and relevance with regard to STFM’s mission and priorities. If found within the scope of STFM’s charge, the issue may be referred to the Board or an appropriate committee or group for full discussion and the development of a consensus position and statement.

The Board agreed that we should discuss controversial issues as an organization, but these issues should be focused on our mission and...
family medicine education. At times, we may agree to not take formal action, but rather simply acknowledge the differences in opinions. When appropriate, we will use our various communication tools (a President’s Column in Family Medicine such as this one, a Messenger article, a Facebook posting, etc) to let our members know about the discussion and decisions.

Decision Regarding Arizona Boycott
With that decision made, the Board then turned its discussion to the specific instance of the Arizona law. This conversation was made easier by the fact that STFM does not have any meetings currently scheduled in Arizona, although it was on the list being considered for an upcoming meeting. One key part of the discussion was that many of our members might very well be directly impacted by the Act and asked to provide documentation of their immigration status. The Board weighed the various sides of the problem carefully and decided to instruct our staff not to consider Arizona for meetings until informed otherwise by the Board. Staff and Board leadership will continue to monitor the situation, and if the Arizona immigration law is modified or the situation otherwise changes, the issue will be brought back to the Board.

Closing Summary
STFM clearly cannot and should not take stands on every political or social issue of the day. This is beyond our mission and scope and would use up valuable resources that need to be applied to our core purpose: Advancing family medicine to improve health through a community of teachers and scholars. However, we certainly encourage active discussion of such issues in our interest groups and among our members. And, the Board is prepared to discuss and potentially take stands on those issues that impact family medicine education and research. We would be glad to hear from our members regarding this discussion and new policy.

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