No question about it: Walking up the steps of the U.S. Capitol building in early March, Paul Godbout and his son Adam were nervous.

The pair had traveled to Washington from Manchester, N.H., to participate for the first time in SAF’s Congressional Action Days (CAD) and for a brief moment, they wished they could trade the impressive D.C. vistas for the more familiar sights and sounds of their busy, everyday work life at Jacques Flower Shop. The prospect of a day filled with meetings in the offices of senators and representatives felt daunting — until a group of legislative aides and interns put them totally at ease.

During their second meeting of the day, in the office of Sen. Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.), “we were suddenly surrounded by people who recognized our business name and had even shopped there,” Paul explained, adding that one staff member gushed about the impressive longevity of the shop’s flowers. (“They lasted for two weeks!” she exclaimed.)

The enthusiastic reception helped the Godbouts shake off their nerves and reminded them of why they were in Washington: to advocate for their business and the industry they love.

**Complicated Issues, Common Sense Solutions**

The Godbouts weren’t alone. On March 9 and 10, nearly 90 retail florists, wholesalers, growers and suppliers were in Washington for CAD. The group included representatives from 25 states and 18 first-time attendees. All together, the delegation met with lawmakers and staff from about 140 offices in the Senate and House of Representatives during a whirlwind of an event that included issues briefing, big-picture insight from Washington insiders and expert advice on how to best capture and keep the attention of elected officials. (Hint: Be personal and specific — and be sure to follow up.)

This year, the CAD delegation arrived on Capitol Hill at a time when two major industry issues — immigration and health care reform — are especially prominent in national headlines (and, notably, hot button topics for both political parties). When SAF members took to the Capitol, they...
2014 midterm elections, the current polarization of the country and Washington, and presidential prospects for 2016, among other topics.

“The 2014 [midterm elections] were like watching a car crash in slow motion for Democrats,” he said. “This was a function I believe, not of change but of the politics of the moment.”

did so to lobby for targeted, common sense solutions, including:

- Clarification of the definitions of seasonal workers/employees in the Affordable Care Act (ACA).
- Raising the ACA’s current threshold for full-time employment from 30 hours to the traditional 40 hours a week.
- The implementation of immigration reform that addresses border reform, an improved E-Verify program and acceptable labor solutions (rather than a current House bill, HR 1147, that attempts to address E-Verify only).

“Having these really specific things to ask for helped a lot this year,” said second-time attendee Mike Mooney of Dramm & Echter in Encinitas, Calif. Rather than lobbying for big-picture reform, SAF members could use real-life stories to tell their lawmakers about specific, often technical changes, that could quickly help small-business owners in the floral industry and beyond run their operations more effectively.

“Overall,” Mooney added, “I think people seemed more open and receptive to our concerns this year.”

Crash Course in Politics

Before meeting with lawmakers and their staff, attendees gathered to hear about the state of politics (and projections for the near future) from David Wasserman, House editor for The Cook Political Report, who discussed the fallout of the
ing opinion but of changing turnout. You would have to go back to 1942 to find an off-year election with lower turnout.” (A year, he noted, when many eligible voters would have been otherwise occupied with World War II.)

Still, he added, another seismic shift, this time among the Republicans, came last summer in the form of the unexpected primary defeat of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) — a loss that continues to have effects in Congress. “Now, just about every Republican is fearful of a primary loss, the threat from their right,” he explained. “That’s why it’s so hard for them to come to an agreement. No one wants to be the next Eric Cantor.”

Advocacy guru Stephanie Vance also returned this year to prep members for their meetings on the Hill. With her trademark humor, Vance painted a vivid picture for members of what they could expect in meetings, and why those expectations might not match what we’ve seen on TV or movies. “Don’t be disappointed if you’re talking to a staff person, rather than a representative or senator,” she said. Staff members may “look like they’re 12 years old,” but they have great influence over the lawmakers they serve.

“In fact,” she said, “with the staff member you’ll probably have a more substantive conversation.”

**On the Hill, Warm Receptions — and Promises to Follow Up**

Vance’s advice held true for Nick Fronduto of Jacobson Floral Company in Boston, who came to CAD with his son, Patrick, a student at Boston University. “I’m constantly amazed by the access average citizens really have on Capitol Hill,” said Fronduto, who has participated in CAD about five times in the past. “You go through a bit of security and suddenly you’re in the office of a congressman or senator. I’m not sure people realize that. If they did, maybe they’d advocate more. The truth is, based on my experience, these lawmakers want to hear from us.”

In the offices of their lawmakers, the father-son duo shared their frustration over the 30-hour workweek definition in the ACA. “My goal was to stress that we, as business owners, want to keep good employees,” and would never shave off an hour or two to avoid paying someone benefits, said Nick. “We want good people, but that 30-hour definition — it ties our hands.”

First-time attendee Dan Sieck, of Sieck Wholesale Florist Group in Baltimore, agreed that, for his business, ACA fixes are paramount. “The health care issues are big ones for us. Our costs are up 25 percent each year over the last four years,” he said. “Part of my pitch [to lawmakers] has been that the confusion caused [by the ACA language] has posed an incredible administrative burden to business owners. It’s confusing and, with limited resources, it’s a terrible use of people’s time, time that could otherwise be spent on the actual business.”

Growers present at CAD proved to be articulate, passionate spokespeople for immigration reform, including Ben Dobbe of Holland America Bulb Farms in Woodland, Wash., who said staff members he met with this year seemed “more receptive” to the issues than in years past. Dobbe also noted limited “middle ground,” in the sense that “people either knew all about the issues and were very involved with them, or they had no idea what we were talking about,” Dobbe explained.

Far from deterring the group, the latter situation opened up an opportunity to start the conversation fresh, par-
particularly on the topic of E-Verify, Dobbe said. “It’s the same situation we’ve faced for years. An employee gives us a name, and it’s not their real name, but we can’t know that,” he said.

Michelle Castellano Keeler, AAF, of Mellano & Company in San Luis Rey, Calif., echoed Dobbe’s points and added her own real-world examples. When it comes to hiring migrant workers, “we, as a company, can do everything right — everything in our power to abide by the law,” said Keeler said. “But we know from the statistics — seven out of 10 ag workers are undocumented — that we are hiring some workers who aren’t who they say they are. There’s a constant fear of a raid. What would happen if you lost seven out of 10 workers, during your busiest time? How could your business survive? That’s a fear growers live with every day.”

And, while CAD attendees are now back home, busy with the consuming work of running their businesses, according to Vance and others, the real work begins now: following up with lawmakers to ensure they know these issues matter to industry businesses — and their constituents are ready to hold them accountable for votes and actions that take place in Washington.

“Collectively, we can make a difference and we can effect change,” said SAF President Shirley Lyons, AAF, PFCI, of Dandelions Flowers & Gifts in Eugene, Ore. “Every time you come to CAD or send an email to Congress, you make a difference.”

That’s a message veteran attendee Manny Gonzales of Tiger Lily Florist in Charleston, S.C., takes seriously.

“I’m a big believer in SAF, and the fact that they are doing important things for us while we are back at home, running our businesses, paying the bills,” said Gonzales. “I grew up in small business, and I know these issues are not floral industry issues, but small-business issues. Through CAD, you can commit to three, 30-minute meetings [on Capitol Hill] and know that you’ve done something that will help the industry and your business year-round.

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