



OP-ED WRITING AND PLACEMENT GUIDE

Starting on April 1st, sequestration will force severe cuts in community cancer care centers across the country – and this will have a very real, negative, effect on countless senior citizens who depend upon Medicare for their cancer treatment.

Even though the problem is widespread, most people – including patients, journalists, community leaders, and even the lawmakers who are responsible for fixing it – don't have any idea that this is even happening.

That's where you come in. As an expert in your community, no one knows this issue better than you, and there is no better messenger to deliver this information to the public. By writing an op-ed or guest column in your local paper, you can spread the word about these disastrous cuts and raise awareness of the need to fix them before more patients are affected.

Before You Start Writing

- > **Selecting Your Target Publication.** While this is a national issue, your voice will carry the most weight if you focus on local papers in your hometown or region. If you have ties to their community, they are much more likely to print your work.
- > **How Many Words?** Before you start, determine the length of op-eds accepted by your target publication. The standard length for many local and regional newspapers is **600-750** words. As a point of comparison, this entire memo is 919 words long. You can usually find the required word length in the Opinion section of the newspaper's website.

Writing Guidelines

- > **Keep it Local.** Newspaper editors have access to a virtually endless stream of editorial content, articles, and columns provided by national wire and syndication services. Many of these are written by well-known experts and pundits whom readers will recognize. If you want your essay to cut through, you need to give them a reason to publish it: it needs to be local and focused on the people, places, and challenges of the community.
- > **Start With a Story.** Many of the most compelling op-eds are built around real stories about real people. Instead of leading with a general statement of the problem ("*Senior citizens in our area could have to travel farther for their cancer treatment*") try leading

with a specific case (*"Judy lives only half a mile from my office, but on her last visit, I could see it was getting hard for her to make the trip"*).

- > **Real Examples, Not Just Statistics.** Policy experts and other professionals might be persuaded by statistics and the difference between 106% and 104.3%, but many readers will need to see specific examples to understand what this means. Instead of discussing percentages in funding cuts, talk about what those cuts would mean for your clinic, staff, or patients. (*"Losing a third of our reimbursement for these treatments would mean laying off staff, forcing us to cut back service hours or even send patients like Judy to a hospital in the next city."*)
- > **Focus on the Problem at Hand.** There are always a number of different public policy issues in play at any one time, and while they may be related, it is best to keep your essay focused on the core problem at hand. In this case, we want to highlight the negative effect of Sequestration on community cancer care – not the broader set of challenges facing community clinics – and to raise awareness of the need to fix this problem.

Placing your Op-Ed

- > **Editing.** Once you've finished your draft, our team is happy to help edit and polish it before publication. Please feel free to send us a copy at chris.vorce@iononline.com for review.
- > **Start at the Top.** Many newspapers will only print op-eds if they are submitted as exclusives. Start with the most-desired paper in your region, call them first, and then if they decline to publish it, move to the next.
- > **Pick Up the Phone.** The "Opinion" or "Contact Us" page of your local newspaper website should have a phone number (and sometimes a name) for the Opinion Page Editor. Don't just email your essay to the general submission address; those inboxes get dozens or hundreds of submissions every day. You also want to find a direct email address for the Opinion Page Editor.
 - > Call the editorial department and ask to speak to the opinion editor (or someone on the opinion page) about submitting an op-ed.
 - > Briefly explain who you are and your topic. (*"I'm a doctor here in town, I run the cancer treatment clinic on [street], and I have written an op-ed about how sequestration could affect my patients and possibly force clinics like mine to close."*)
 - > Confirm the name of the editor to whom your email should be addressed, and confirm the **submission contact address, length and format.** Some editorial departments want text pasted into the body of an email; others want attachments.
 - > Send your essay promptly to the designated contact (as well as the opinion page editor), reference your conversation, and request that they follow-up with you to let you know if they plan to publish your work.
- > **If At First You Don't Succeed....** Don't be discouraged. The vast majority of op-ed submissions don't get published initially. If your first target doesn't print your essay, you have a few options: Try another paper, try a local TV or radio station website, post it on your own website, Facebook page, or blog. If you are a member of a professional or community listserv that accepts submissions, send it there. It can be just as valuable to have your piece seen online as in print.
- > **Keep Us Posted.** Once the paper has agreed to publish your op-ed (or if you've found another avenue for getting it out there) let us know! We can make sure your work is posted and shared as part of the national campaign to raise awareness of the issue.