Communicating with Elected Officials
Personal Visits

A personal visit with a state legislator or a member of Congress is probably the most effective way to emphasize your interest in an issue or bill. A visit with your state legislator can occur either in the state capitol or in his or her local office; a visit with a member of Congress can be scheduled in Washington, D.C., or at one of his or her district offices. Local visits are often easier to schedule, less rushed, and give you more “quality time” with a legislator. You don’t have to travel hundreds of miles in order to meet with your state or federal legislators!

Tips for Planning a Meeting with Elected Officials

- Make an appointment. Explain the reason for the meeting, the time needed (usually no more than 20-30 minutes), and identify any other individuals who will attend.

- Don't be put off or insulted if you are offered an opportunity to meet with staff instead of the legislator. Some legislators delegate many of their meetings with constituents to staff. This does not mean that your legislator will be unreceptive to your views or that your message will not be heard. Staff members report back to their bosses about meetings with constituents and are often very influential in their own right.

- Learn about the legislator and his or her positions on issues.

- Thank the legislator for co-sponsoring, and voting for bills and issues that you are working on.

Tips for Conducting a Meeting with an Elected Official

- Be on time. Don’t be disturbed if you have to wait since there may have been unavoidable delays or changes in the schedule.

- When you arrive, introduce yourself to the receptionist. If you have a business card, give one to the receptionist.

- When you meet the legislator (or staff person), introduce yourself and identify the group you are representing. If you are a constituent, share that as well.

- State the reason for your visit concisely and accurately. Limit the number of issues you discuss and refer to bills by name and number.

- If your legislator has already publicly supported your position, express your thanks and tell him or her how much his or her efforts are appreciated. If your legislator has not yet committed to your position, clearly state reasons for supporting your position, and let him or her know you would appreciate his or her support. If your legislator is not supportive of your position, give him or her information and politely ask him or her to reconsider the issue.

- Offer to be a resource. Congressional staffs usually are not experts in the issue areas they cover and often turn to trusted outside experts. Knowing that there’s someone in the district who really understands the issue can be very helpful.

- Have a picture taken with the official if possible. Use the picture in your agency newsletter or local newspapers to provide publicity for the official and your organization.

- Thank the legislator for his or her time and leave promptly.
Tips for Following up on a Meeting with an Elected Official

- Write a thank-you letter or e-mail to the official. Summarize points made and include any follow-up information requested.
- If you took a photo with the legislator and it is printed in your local newspaper or in your newsletter, be sure to send a copy to the legislator.

Writing Letters

Public officials and their staffs pay careful attention to their mail since it forms the major body of public and voter sentiment on pending legislative activity.

Many people find aren’t sure how to communicate with their legislators. Often, form letters with identical wording and petitions are used. Most legislators, however, place little weight on such an approach. The type of letter that is most appreciated and helpful is one that is carefully thought out and represents an individual’s point of view concerning the bill or legislative matter that is being considered. It should explain how the measure will benefit the writer or the community, or how the measure can be improved. Since everyone does not have the same base of information or experience, letters should be clear and concise, and at the same time reflect respect for the intelligence of the legislator and his staff.

Tips for Writing Letters to Elected Officials

- Identify yourself and your reason for writing.
- Refer to legislation by its bill number or title. If you don’t know the number or title of a bill, describe the issue in enough detail to enable the legislator to respond thoughtfully and appropriately.
- Do not criticize or be negative. If you disagree with your legislator, tell him or her why, but be courteous and respectful.
- It is not necessary for you to type your letter, unless your handwriting is impossibly illegible. Most of the mail legislators receive from constituents is hand-written.
- Keep a copy of your letter.
- One of the greatest rewards legislators can receive - and one that is perhaps most cherished - is a simple letter thanking them for his or her performance.
- Do not expect to hear back within a week. Legislative offices often receive an extraordinary amount of mail. However, feel free to call the legislator’s office if you have not received a reply within six weeks.

Telephone Calls

Telephone communication is most effective when time is of the essence and the issue you are concerned about will be addressed in the next several days or weeks. When you call, you may not be able to speak directly with the legislator, but you can be assured that your message will be relayed to him or her by the staff person you speak with.
Tips When Telephoning Legislators

• Be prepared! Before calling, have your message written in front of you and review it carefully, so that you know exactly what you will say.

• As with letter writing, keep the message simple and concise. Ask for specific action on the part of the legislator, and make sure you know the legislator's position on your issue.

• Be sure to leave your name and address, and ask for a response from your legislator regarding your call.

• Be courteous. Legislative staff work long hours and have many demands and pressures on their time. They are there to help you. They are much more likely to do so if you are respectful and courteous.

• Although you will have done your homework before calling, don’t be afraid to ask questions. You can learn a lot talking to staff about the political field of play regarding your issue, timelines for committee action, etc.

E-Mail

State and Federal Legislators send and receive e-mail via the Internet and many encourage their constituents to use e-mail to communicate with them.

If you do communicate by e-mail with a legislator, be sure to include your name and postal address in the body of your message. The legislator will want to check to be sure that you reside in his or her district before responding.

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• Do not criticize or be negative. If you disagree with your legislator, tell him or her why, but be courteous and respectful.

• Keep e-mails brief and concise.

• Keep a copy of your e-mail.

• Ask for specific action on the part of the legislator.

• One of the greatest rewards legislators can receive - and one that is perhaps most cherished - is a simple e-mail thanking them for his or her performance.

Finding the Right Address:

To find e-mail addresses for State Senators and State Representatives, go to www.legis.state.pa.us
To find e-mail addresses for Senators, go to www.senate.gov.
To find e-mail addresses for Representatives, go to www.house.gov.
Building Rapport with Legislators

You can enhance your effectiveness as an advocate by establishing a relationship with a legislator that is based on more than simply asking them to do something (or not do something) once or twice a year. Establishing rapport does not guarantee that a legislator will do what you want when you ask them; however, it will ensure that you will have the access you need in order to present your case.

Tips for building rapport with legislators

- Invite a legislator to address a meeting of your organization. Be flexible about the topic of the talk, suggesting general issues like education or Medicaid, or even how families can work more effectively with their legislators.

- Invite your legislators to visit your organization. Legislators like to learn about what's going on in their district. If it is appropriate and would not be disruptive or invasive of the privacy of other participants, invite legislators to visit and learn more about a program or service you provide.

- If a legislator has done something noteworthy for persons with disabilities and their families recognize what they have done by presenting an award. However, only recognize real accomplishments and effort. Don't present an unearned award just to try to gain access and favor.

- Attend "town meetings" and other forums sponsored by your legislators. Introduce yourself and let him or her know what you do. If there is no "burning issue" you need his or her help with at the moment, so much the better. You're building a relationship so that when you do need his or her help, you'll be more likely to get it.

- Volunteer to work in political campaigns. If there's a candidate you support, call his or her campaign headquarters and offer to volunteer. Even if you can only spare one night to help out, legislators appreciate any and all the help they get. They and their staff will remember that you helped. Working in campaigns can be a great way to network, too.
COMMUNICATING WITH LEGISLATORS.
CHECKLIST TO MAKE SURE YOU’RE ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

Background Research
Think about the following questions:

____ Who are my representative and senators?
____ What is their legislative record and general philosophy?
____ What issues are they passionate about?
____ What committees are my representative or senators on?
____ Is my representative or senator newly elected, or more senior?
____ What party does my representative or senator belong to?

Message Development

____ Tell a compelling story -- you have something of value to contribute!
____ Know your facts
____ Make your message your own
____ Be positive

General Message Delivery
These tips apply to all communications -- letters, emails, phone calls, and meetings.

____ Decide which method of communication suits you and your purpose
____ Develop a thoughtful, well-argued message
____ Ask your member to take a specific action
____ Ask your member to respond to the request
____ Make it clear what your priorities are
____ Tell your congressional office how you can be an ongoing resource
____ Make your message targeted and forceful without being rude or threatening
____ Tell the truth
____ Be reasonable about opposing points of view
____ Be prepared to answer questions about opposing arguments

Effective Meetings

____ Determine whether a meeting is needed to deliver the message
____ Decide where you want to meet, after looking at the congressional calendar
____ Decide who you want to deliver your message (preferably someone from the district)
____ Limit the number of people you bring to the meeting
____ If you’re in DC for a national meeting, try to coordinate with others from your state
____ Fax the scheduler a meeting request, including a list of issues and attendees
____ Follow-up with a phone call to the scheduler after sending a written request
____ Schedule carefully to assure you will be on time, but not too early, for each meeting
____ Be prepared to meet anywhere -- standing up in the hallway or on the run to a vote
____ Be prepared to deliver your message in five minutes
____ Make sure you have short, concise, and consistent information to leave behind
____ Leave your information in a file folder with your organization’s name on the label
Effective Written Communications

____ Make your communication stand out by making it personal, thoughtful, and accurate
____ Ask for a response
____ Confine each written communication to one topic
____ Double check office numbers, fax numbers, and e-mail addresses

Effective Phone Calls

____ If you want someone to think about what you’re saying, ask for a response
____ Have the basic facts about the issue on hand

Following Up

____ Send a thank you note to the staff and the member soon after a meeting
____ Wait at least three weeks for a response before checking back
____ Report on your meeting in a non-threatening way