

Tips for Contacting Your Legislators

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There are 3 basic ways to make contact with your legislator. Email/ letter writing, phone calls, or meet in person.

The easiest is to make a phone call or write a letter. When writing a letter to your senator or representative there are a few things to remember. Identify yourself as a constituent, include your full name address and contact information. Your legislators like to hear opinions from constituents and want to be kept informed what is going on in their district. Base your letter on your own experiences and observations. Personal stories on how a particular issue or piece of legislation will affect you or your community have a greater impact. If writing about a specific bill, describe it by number or name. Even more important is a concrete statement of the reasons for your position--particularly if you are writing about a field or subject in which you have specialized knowledge. Legislators have to vote on lot of things with which they have had little or no first-hand experience. Some of the most valuable information they receive comes from facts presented in letters from people who have knowledge in the field. Short well thought out letters that present a definite position are almost always the best. Do not engage in letter writing overkill. Quality, not quantity, is what counts. Ask for a reply.

It takes minutes to place a call to your legislator, and it can make a world of difference. Before placing the call become familiar with the issue you wish to comment on. Ask to speak to your legislator directly. Telephone calls are often taken by a staff member, not the legislative member. If your legislator is not available it's a good idea to write down the name and title of the person you speak with. Keep in mind that it is important to develop and maintain good relationships with your legislator's staff members. Often you may get more time and be able to explain issues in depth to a staff member. Ask to speak with the assistant who is working on your issues (i.e, healthcare, budget, education) When speaking with your legislator or staff, identify yourself by name and the organization that you represent if any or the town from which you are calling. Legislators are most responsive to their constituents, the people who keep them in office. If you voted for them, let them know. Engage them in conversation, for instance, you can ask your legislator if they are familiar with the issue you are advocating for. Your legislator may not have prior knowledge, so be prepared to educate them. Use personal and local examples to make your point. Ask them for their support and thank them for their time and consideration. If you reach a voice mail, leave a short message identifying yourself and contact information, ask for a return call.

Finally you can meet with your legislator in person. Talking to an elected official may seem intimidating at first, but it is important to remember that it is a normal part of their job. They want to know what you think and how they can help, especially if you live in their district. Do your homework. Try to know the basics about the piece of legislation you are going to address. If there isn't any specific legislation, be able to explain what you are concerned about and why. Call the office and ask to speak the person who schedules the legislator's time. Ask them to schedule an appointment for you with the legislator. You can go alone or in a group with other like minded advocates. If the legislator is unavailable, ask to schedule an appointment with the staff member who handles your issue. Don't feel bad if you don't get to speak to the legislator every time. Legislative staff members work very closely with the legislator and they are good allies to have.

When addressing your legislator address them by their title, Senator, Representative and their last name. Be personal tell them a little about yourself—where you live, what you do for a living, if

you are representing yourself or an organization. Be sure to tell them that you live in their district (if you do). Connect your talking points to your story (how it has impacted you or your community). If possible provide at least one piece of data that will support your point of view. If available you can always provide them a short brief or fact sheet on your topic. Be focused remember they may have only a few minutes to share with you so stay on topic. Also, don't let the legislator change the subject either. Be polite, but be firm. Stay positive. Don't be argumentative. You may not agree with the stand your legislator is taking on a particular issue but remember your goal is to have a long-term relationship; you are looking for common ground on the issues in which you are interested. Don't be defensive. They may ask tough questions. They are probably asking the questions that will be asked of them. Give them information that will help them justify why they should support your issue. The legislative process involves compromises, and you always have the right to participate in the process. Just be positive while you firmly state your positions. Don't leave without asking them to support your issue. If there is a bill associated with the issue, be specific and ask them to support the bill. You can ask them, "Will you support this legislation?" Ask them if they have any questions or need any additional information. Thank them for their time and attention. Follow up with a thank you note and anything else you promised.

We can all be advocates for issues that concern us. The way to do so is through effective communication with the people who are making decisions and policies that affect you. You can increase your impact by engaging in grassroots education of family, friends and community members to help gather support for your issue. Encourage them to contact their legislators, together we are stronger. Make your voice heard!