

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH LEGISLATORS

There are many tactics to use in advocating for your respective issue. The following are the most commonly used tactics with tips on how to use them effectively.

Letter

Letters to the signatory's senator and representative are critical to influencing legislation. Here are some guidelines to follow in writing effective letters:

- **Use your own stationery.** Double check that the letter is addressed correctly and proof read it before mailing.
- **Strive to be clear about your position.** Be precise in explaining what you would like your legislator to do. Legislators and their staff must read a lot of materials; help them out by limiting your letter to one page. Avoid sending a postcard or form letter. Handwritten letters are fine, if they are legible.
- **Write in your own words.** This is an effective technique. Express how this legislation affects you personally.
- **Write briefly, on only one subject at a time, in your letter.** Refer to bills by name and number.
- **Only write a letter when it is essential.** If you write too often, you risk the chance of being ignored.
- **Make sure the legislator knows if you live in his/her district.**
- **Follow-up with the legislator,** if you ask the legislator a question and don't get a reply to your letter.
- **When a legislator votes as you asked, send a thank-you note.** Most letters received by legislators are critical in tone and are asking for something from the legislator. A thank-you note is a refreshing change that is likely to be remembered.

Committee Testimony

All bills are referred to a committee. Public testimony is presented and considered by legislators during the committee's public hearing. When a bill that affects you or your organization is heard by the committee, it is important that your interests be represented by testifying before the committee. Here are recommendations for presenting effective testimony:

- **Committee rules and deadlines can be suspended or changed unexpectedly.** When the bill is assigned to committee, contact the committee staff if you need help tracking the legislation. Always call the committee staff to be sure there has been no last minute changes before coming to the State Capitol.
- **Know the location of the committee meeting beforehand and arrive a half-hour early before the committee hearing in order to sign up to testify and get settled in.**

Be prepared to stay longer than you anticipated, as many committee hearings can run longer than expected, especially if there is a contentious issue being discussed.

- **Review the committee roster** to familiarize yourself with committee members.
- **Submit written testimony either beforehand or at the committee hearing.** Make sure your testimony is legible; preferably typed and is no more than two pages. Committee staff can help you with this process.
- **Bring enough copies of your testimony for each member of the committee and its staff, as well as for members of the press who may be in attendance.** Before the hearing begins, take copies to the committee clerk, and sign the witness list indicating your desire to testify.
- **Don't use jargon in your testimony.** You are in a legislative forum; many people in a committee hearing may not understand the respective jargon of your particular field of interest.
- **Begin your testimony by identifying yourself and who you represent.** Be brief in your opening statement and speak no more than 5 minutes. Summarize the main points of your written testimony. Committee members will listen more attentively if express your views informally and spontaneously. Practice your statement numerous times before the hearing and avoid getting distracted while you are speaking.
- **Dress appropriately.** Your appearance is as important to some legislators as what you say and how you say it.
- **Close by thanking the committee** and offering to answer any questions that legislators may have.

Answering Questions

- **It is acceptable for legislators to interrupt witnesses to ask questions.** Answer the questions as honestly as you can. If you do not know the answer, say so. If necessary, defer to another witness who is more knowledgeable on the subject or promise to supply the information at a later date.
- **If asked whether you would support the bill if it were changed, do not publicly commit yourself to a position,** if there is a chance you will later need to withdraw your support. Instead, respond that you or your organization will need to consider the amended proposal.
- **If you are asked an irrelevant or rhetorical question, use the opportunity to restate your position** while politely diverting attention from the question.
- **Remain calm if you are asked a hostile or personal question, avoid a public confrontation.** Diffuse the hostility by remaining poised and unruffled.
- **Even if you are sure that your position will not be approved, your testimony may gain respect for your organization or may educate committee members in ways that may not be immediately apparent.** Your testimony becomes a part of the legislative record on the issue, which is important to reinforce your position and show that you were part of the process.

Telephone Calls

- **Keep the telephone conversation brief.** Start by identifying yourself by name and address, identifying the bill you want to talk about by name and number and briefly state what your position is and how you would like your legislator to vote.
- **Ask for your legislator's view on the bill or issue and ask for a commitment to vote for your position.** Don't argue if the legislator takes a position against you or is unwilling to take a stand.
- **If your legislator requires further information, supply it as quickly as possible.** The legislature moves rapidly during the session and the legislator cannot wait a long time to receive an answer from you.
- **Be sensitive to the legislator's schedule.** If the legislature is in session, your legislators are probably on the floor of the chamber or at a committee hearing, so you may not be able to speak to them directly. When talking to a legislative staff person, identify yourself, the bill you want to talk about by name and number, and state how you would like your legislator to vote. Legislators' staff people are very reliable and will tell the legislator that you called and what you said.
- **Follow up your phone call with a note thanking them for their time.** Use the note as an opportunity to briefly restate your position.

Personal Meetings

One of the most effective ways to lobby legislators is to meet face-to-face with them. Because of the hectic legislative pace, it is difficult to predict a legislator's availability during the legislative session. Nevertheless, if legislators know that their constituents have traveled to the capitol, they will generally try to see them. Always call first to make an appointment. To maximize your efforts, make contact with your respective senator and representative. The following are recommendations for visiting with legislators:

- **When you set up the meeting, be clear about your meeting's purpose.** Identify all meeting participants and affiliations. Inform the legislator and/or their staff who will be in the room in advance of the meeting.
- **Be on time for your appointment.** But don't expect legislators to be on time; they often have hearings or meetings they cannot anticipate and cannot leave. You must be patient.
- **Practice a three-minute statement of all the information you want to present.** This will force you to think about what you want and why you want it, as well as respect the legislator's limited time.
- **Prepare materials in advance.** Make sure that you have materials that explain your principle arguments and current contact information.
- **Keep meeting participants to a minimum.** Visit your legislators in small groups (three people are optimum) and to keep your visits brief by planning to stay no more than 15 minutes.

- **Identify meeting affiliations.** You should convey the impression that these three people are representatives of many more. If each of the three people represents a different organization, their potential voting power will maximize your lobbying impact.
- **Let the legislator know if you are one of their constituents.** If you have any family, social, business, or political ties to the legislator you are meeting with, let them know. This may serve as identification when your point of view is considered.
- **Identify your respective roles.** Let your legislators know if you are working with others on the issue, if you are active in the community, or if you are representing members of your organization.
- **A short one-page written statement of your position should be presented to your legislators to explain what the bill does and why they should support your viewpoint.** Make sure you give a copy to the staff, preferably before the appointment. If amendments are being offered, have a mock-up of what the bill would look like with the amendments in it.
- **Be clear about what your position is and what you would like your legislators to do.** Identify your bill by name and number. Give the legislator some key words about the bill (e.g. “This is the bill that will create more green jobs in our neighborhood”). This is helpful to legislators because they are dealing with thousands of bills and may be too embarrassed to admit they don't know what the bill is about.
- **Be courteous in dealing with your legislators and never “burn your bridges.”** Never let any disagreements lead to harsh or personal remarks. If you lose your temper or prevent them from speaking, you will greatly compromise your ability to get their support. It is important not to alienate them—you may need their support on other issues.
- **Be firm about your position.** Do not try to force your legislators into changing their minds or committing themselves when they don't want to, but it's fair to ask them how they stand on the issue.
- **Respect legislative staff's role.** If for some unforeseen reason, the legislator is unable to meet with you at the last minute and you meet with their staff, treat their staff with the same respect as you would treat the legislator.
- **Follow up your visit with a thank-you letter.** Use it to restate your position.