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We Educate

How to Communicate Effectively with Legislators



Why advocate?

Every piece of legislation starts as an idea, and that idea can come from a legislator, a staff member, a professional lobbyist, or an “average citizen.” Legislation succeeds or fails depending on a number of factors. Advocacy organizations represent the views of like-minded individuals when it comes to supporting or opposing bills but the most powerful voice still belongs to the individual constituent.

It may seem as if one person cannot affect the legislative process. After all, conventional wisdom holds that the political process is corrupt and the government is broken. Politicians don’t listen to an average citizen. Legislators can’t get anything done.

However, these common narratives must be challenged. While government does not function perfectly, and it can sometimes be hard to make your legislators listen, effective communication strategies can increase the chances of your opinion having an impact. Our system of government is slow-moving and complex, but the legislation that makes its way through this process has the potential to fundamentally change the way our society functions. Your voice does matter in this process, and the only way to make a difference is by using it to advocate for the issues you care about.

What influences elected officials?

- Personal relationships: Friends, family, and staff members have a tremendous influence on the day-to-day decisions of elected officials.
- The message: What you say to elected officials is actually important! Latter sections of this document will help you
- develop a winning message. The media: Media coverage of events will often have an influence on what elected officials talk about in hearings and introduce as legislation. Party considerations: Elected officials are often swayed by their political party’s priorities.

- Personal interests and passions: All elected officials have one or more policy issues that they care about deeply. Effective advocates will identify those interests and then frame their message accordingly.
- Staff: It is critical to build good relationships and communicate effectively with legislative staff, as they are generally responsible for briefing elected officials about an issue and advising on what their position should be.
- Most importantly... their constituents: A common refrain in any elected official's office is, "How does this impact my constituents?" It is the lens through which many or most decisions are made.

KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT

Why is it important to ask for something specific?

Asking for something specific is often the most effective way to get an elected official's attention. Your objective is to encourage someone in the office to think for more than a few minutes about the issues that you have brought to his or her attention; making a clear and concise "ask" helps you to achieve that goal. There are two key types of ask: policy and relationship-building.

- Policy asks are oriented toward specific legislative or government initiatives (e.g., asking a member of Congress to support a particular bill, sign onto a letter, lead a particular legislative initiative, etc.). Your organization, if you are affiliated with one, may have some asks for you to make.
- Relationship-building asks, such as attendance at an event, are requests not necessarily related to policy that may nevertheless help you with policy asks in the future.

What is appropriate to ask?

- You may ask elected officials to do any of the following:
 - Introduce, vote for, or vote against legislation.
 - Cosponsor legislation introduced by someone else in the same chamber of the legislature.
 - Send a letter to an agency about a specific concern or sign onto a letter drafted by another legislator.
 - Send a letter to another member of the legislature in an influential position, such as the chair or ranking member of a particular committee. Help you find and gather information from agencies and research services.
 - Submit a statement to the federal Congressional Record or official state record of legislative action, if applicable.

What is inappropriate to ask?

- Elected officials cannot do the following, however:
 - Take action for the specific purpose of benefitting you and/or your business Sponsor legislation that is not within their jurisdiction; for example—
 - House members cannot cosponsor or vote for Senate legislation, and vice versa (although they have the option of introducing companion legislation in the chamber in which they serve).
 - Federal legislators cannot cosponsor or vote for state-level legislation, and vice versa.

The power of constituency

People tend to think that elected officials pay attention only to those who contribute to their election campaigns. However, in many cases, people and organizations contribute to a candidate's campaign because they believe that individual is already inclined to vote in a manner beneficial to some constituent interest—not because they are trying to “buy” the person's vote. In fact, most legislative staff members (who conduct most of the meetings with constituents) do not know who has made campaign contributions. Notwithstanding the influence of money in politics, it is important to recognize that you have power as a constituent—and that the power of constituency is valuable as you communicate with your elected officials.

Relationship-building asks

Sometimes, you may be in a situation where it is inappropriate to make policy-related asks. Say, for example, you have had a meeting with your legislator and he or she has indicated a willingness to think about what you have asked but will not be able to make a decision right away. Since you want to be sure the legislator knows of your continued interest in the issue, you might want to consider making some “relationship-building asks.” Asking the legislator to come see something in the district or to submit a statement for your website is a far more effective way to encourage continued thinking about the issue than simply sending information.

The following are some of the things you might ask your elected officials to do in order to develop stronger

- relationships with them: Visit people or places in the community that relate to your issue.
- Write an article for your newsletter.
- Submit a statement for your website or participate in an
- online discussion. Make a speech on the House or Senate floor about your issue.
- Submit a statement to the Congressional Record or official state record of legislative action,
- if applicable. Attend a meeting or employee luncheon.
- Hold a town hall or community meeting on your issue.
- Submit an editorial on the issue to a local or national
- newspaper. Meet with you and other supporters in the district office.
- Use social media to communicate support for or information about the issue.

Knowing the Person You Are Talking to and Why You are Relevant to Them

Before you meet with your elected officials, you should take some time to learn about their interests so that you can frame your message in a way that is bound to get their full attention. You can organize your findings in an Excel spreadsheet or other database and update and review it as needed. Here are five things you need to know before your meeting:

1. Which district or state does the legislator represent?

Representatives and senators at both the state and national levels represent distinct groups of people and primarily devote their energy to the requests and needs of those individuals. On the federal level, each member of the House of Representatives represents all the people who reside in a congressional district—a distinct geographic area within a state. (Based on the 2010 census, an average of around 710,000 people live in each congressional district.) Every state has two senators who represent the entire state. Hence, every American has one representative and two senators who are responsible for representing their views in Congress. At the state government level, the number of representatives and senators representing you varies from state to state. In most states, however, you will have one legislator in each chamber who represents the area in which you live.

In general, you should stick to contacting your own representative and senators, unless you can demonstrate that you speak for people who live in another district or state. If you contact other elected officials, do not be surprised if your phone calls, letters and/or requests for meetings are referred to the legislators who serve the area or state where you live.

2. What is the elected official's legislative record?

What does she or he care about? Most legislators have a record—reflected through votes, legislation they have introduced, and cosponsoring legislation introduced by other members—on virtually every issue under the sun. Before your meeting, know where the member stands on issues that concern you.

3. On which committee or committees does the legislator serve?

Members of Congress are assigned to committees based on their interests, their expertise, their districts/states, and (particularly for the more competitive, major committees) seniority. Members usually serve on one to three committees. Committees within state legislatures are often assigned based on similar criteria. A legislator's ability to influence legislation depends largely upon whether she or he is a member of the committee to which that bill is assigned. Knowing the committee assignments of your elected officials can give you insights into the issues that interest them and information about how they can be most effective in helping you.

4. Where is the elected official on the seniority scale?

The seniority of members of Congress, both House and Senate, is based upon when they were elected to that office. State legislatures similarly base some measures of influence on the length of tenure. If your legislator is relatively new to office, the unfortunate fact is that she or he generally will not be able to move as many legislative initiatives or secure as many dollars for a project as will a more senior legislator. However, if your legislator is a committee chair or ranking member, or a member of the leadership, you are in luck. These individuals have a far greater ability to move policy proposals through the legislative process.

5. To which party does the legislator belong?

Your legislators have been elected to represent you and your interests, regardless of your party affiliation. However, it is important to know their party affiliations to determine if they are in the majority or minority party in the legislature. While many legislators seek to work collaboratively and across party lines, members of the majority party still have an advantage in efforts to get legislative proposals passed.

The fastest way to gather this information is to go online. AWI's Action Center (</action-center>) is a searchable database that tracks members' cosponsorship of and votes on radon awareness bills. It covers the current Congress as well as the three previous Congresses. Members' individual websites also provide information on where they stand on the issues. The Action Center includes links to these sites.

For information on state bills, you can visit the main page of a specific state legislature. Bills are searchable by number, keyword, and sponsor, and each representative (sometimes called "assemblymember" or "delegate") and senator has a page with contact and other information. AWI's website (</content/state-bills>) also provides details about certain state bills related to radon awareness and lung cancer topics.

Note: Federal bills are designated either House of Representatives (H.R.) or Senate (S.), depending on the chamber of Congress in which the bill originated, followed by a number. Other forms of legislation include resolutions, joint resolutions, and concurrent resolutions. Sometimes similar or identical "companion" bills are introduced in both chambers. State bills generally use H or HB, and S or SB.

GENERAL MESSAGE DELIVERY TIPS

Tell a personal story

The most important thing to remember in developing and delivering a message for your elected official is that you have something of value to contribute. In fact, you are one of the most important people with whom the legislator or staff will meet that day because you are a constituent and/or you represent the concerns of constituents.

Your job in the meeting is not to present as many facts and figures as you can about your issue. Rather, your job is to make the issue relevant to the elected official or staff person. You can achieve that goal by telling a personal story.

Think about it: There is some reason why you have decided to be an advocate on your issues of concern. It likely affects you directly in some deeply personal way. That is the message you need to relay to your elected officials.

They can get all the facts, figures, and statistics from fact sheets that you or your organization prepare in advance of the meeting. What you bring to the table is a compelling story about the impact of policy issues on people that legislator represents.

Questions and ideas to consider as you develop and articulate your personal story

Take a few minutes to weave the following (or other compelling) themes into an anecdote:

1. Why did you become an advocate?
2. How does the issue you are discussing affect you directly?
3. (Does it impact your personal family? Do you have personal experience with the issue? Does it relate to your organization's core mission?)
4. Do you have friends, family, clients, customers, or colleagues with compelling stories?
5. (Have they contributed to your cause? Joined your campaign because of their own strong views or unique experiences?)
6. How do these people and others connect to the legislator's district?

Being a resource

In addition to telling a personal story, you should act as a resource for the member's office. There is no way to relay everything you know about an issue in a 15- minute meeting. What you really want to convey is that you know a great deal about what the issue means to people in the district or state. Because legislative staff must, by necessity, work on a wide range of topics, they often turn to trusted outside experts for information. If you are an expert in your field, let the office know that you are available to answer any questions.

Ten tips for effective messages

You need to deliver your message in a way that will make legislators and their staff sit up and take notice. In addition to the approaches noted above, here are 10 tips that will help your message stand out among the hundreds that pour into a legislative office every day:

1. Always identify yourself

It is a waste of your time to meet with your elected officials without making it clear how you are connected to the district or state that they represent. The official and staff will be more likely to focus on your issue if they know how it relates to constituents such as yourself.

2. Leave materials with them

You will definitely want to leave something behind that succinctly summarizes your message. If you or your organization do not have materials at hand, it is possible that an organization that works on the same issues will. Whatever materials you provide, be sure to include your name and contact information. Otherwise, elected officials and their staff may not know how best to contact you for additional information. Or you may wish to send a thank you letter as a follow-up to your meeting, and you may send additional material at that time.

3. Be specific

Too often, legislative offices receive vague comments like "You should care about your community," or "The Legislature should be taking stronger positions." These types of messages usually receive a very formulaic response such as "Thanks, I will keep your views in mind." To be more effective, you must ask your legislator to do something specific related to your position, such as cosponsor a bill or look into a situation in the district that concerns you.

4. Prioritize your requests

If you ask for too many things without making it clear what your top priorities are, the office you are talking to may feel overwhelmed and be unable to identify the key areas on which to expend limited staff resources. Let the office know what action needs the most attention in the short term. Better yet, try to space your requests so that you are not asking for more than a few things at once.

5. Do not vilify your opponents

It is important to refrain from labeling those who disagree with you as uninformed and careless, or otherwise denigrating them. In fact, it is often helpful to acknowledge opposing views so that staff recognize that you have developed your position based on a careful evaluation of the facts and different positions. This doesn't mean you shouldn't feel passionately about your position, or shouldn't refute opposing arguments, but it is critical not to give staff the impression that the information you have presented is unreliable because it is colored by your intense feelings.

6. Be polite

You know the old adage: You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. That applies to your dealings with people in legislative offices as well. During your meetings, you should always be polite. Even though you may be frustrated with government, try not to approach the meeting as an adversarial situation. Treating staff poorly, arguing with them, suggesting that they are uninformed or don't care, or becoming confrontational will not achieve your goals. In fact, it can harm your cause and interfere with your ability to work with that office in the future.

7. Be patient

You should not expect an immediate response to your comments or concerns. In many cases, the issue may be one about which the legislator has not yet formed an opinion. That said, it is perfectly appropriate to ask when you should call back to see if the legislator has taken a position. In fact, if you make it clear you are going to follow up, he or she will be more likely to focus on your request.

8. Do not deliver ultimatums

The statement "If he/she does not agree with me on this issue, I will not vote for him/her" carries very little weight in a legislator's office. For every person making that statement on one side of any issue, there is often another person making the same statement on the other side. Frankly, it is impossible to satisfy people who base their decisions on only one issue, and most offices will not bend over backwards to try.

9. Always tell the truth

Legislative staff turn to outside individuals they trust for advice and assistance on important policy issues all the time. Accordingly, it is important to ensure that all information you provide is accurate and up-to-date, and to avoid exaggerating, misstating facts, or otherwise misrepresenting information. If you are asked a question you cannot answer, it is okay to say so, and if you are able to look into it and get back to them, please share that as well.

10. Do not talk about the campaign with staff

Most legislative staff get very nervous when people they are meeting with, from lobbyists to constituents, mention the legislator's campaign. Some staffers may actually be offended. The laws against staff involvement in their boss's campaign are very strict, and wandering into any gray area can put both the legislator and the staff person at risk of violating election laws. In particular, any suggestion that the staff person's help on a legislative issue may translate into a campaign contribution is strictly forbidden. It is illegal, unethical, and immoral for the office to take specific actions in exchange for campaign contributions. Such a suggestion may, in fact, make staff avoid helping you because they are worried it would look bad for their boss.

MEETING WITH STAFF

Effective meetings

When you walk into a legislative office, do not be surprised if it feels somewhat chaotic. On busy days, telephones ring constantly, televisions show the day's floor debate, and staff are hurrying from one meeting to another. This is why it is so important to prepare your talking points in advance.

The person at the front desk (usually a staff assistant) will greet you. Let that individual know you are there for a meeting and with whom (sometimes your meeting will be with a staff person rather than your elected official). You may be asked either to have a seat in the office lobby or, if there is no space, to wait outside. The staff assistant will let the person with whom you are meeting know that you have arrived and that person will come out to greet you and start the meeting.

Here is a good way to approach the meeting:

- State who you are and make the district connection: For example, "My name is XX and I am from X's district." If you are with an organization in the district you may wish to mention the organization by name.
- Explain why you are there: "I am hoping that he/she will support [bill name], which would do X, Y, and Z."
- Explain why it is important to you (this is where your personal story comes in): "[Bill name] is important to me because it [protects homeowners, schools and workplaces from high levels of radon, helps to improve indoor air quality etc.]."
- As necessary and appropriate, refer to the materials that you will be leaving behind (but do not read them to the staff people). Ask if the legislator has taken a position on the issue. (The answer will often be "no.")
- Let them know that you are available as a resource and that you will follow up to see if there are questions and/or if the legislator can support your position. Be sure to ask the best way to follow up (phone, e-mail, or meeting) and collect all contact information.
- Remember to write thank you notes to staff following meetings; an email is generally sufficient.
- On the state level, you have a much better chance of actually meeting with the legislator since state legislatures often have very few, and sometimes no, staff. You will learn when you ask for an appointment with whom you'll be meeting. While the suggestions provided here are geared towards meetings with members and staff of the US Congress, they certainly apply as well to meetings with state lawmakers.

Congressional staff

- Staff Assistant – Most House offices have one staff assistant. Most Senate offices have at least two. They handle the front desk duties, including answering phones, greeting visitors, sorting mail, coordinating tours, and in some offices, handling a few policy issues.
- Scheduler/Executive Assistant – This person schedules the member’s time. In many offices, they may also handle a policy issue or two.
- Legislative Correspondent (LC) – In addition to drafting letters in response to constituents’ comments and questions, LCs also generally handle a few legislative issues. Most House offices have one or two LCs. Senators have three to five, depending on their states’ populations.
- Legislative Assistant (LA) – Legislative assistants handle the bulk of the policy work in a congressional office. A House office usually will have two to four LAs and a Senate office will have from three to as many as twelve (again, depending upon the state’s population).
- Legislative Director (LD) – In some cases, the person who handles your issue may also be the legislative director who, in addition to handling policy issues, also oversees the legislative staff. There is usually just one legislative director in each congressional office.
- Press Secretary/Communications Director – This individual fields all contact from the media and is often the spokesperson for the office. House offices usually have one designated press person. Senate offices have two to five.
- Chief of Staff – The chief of staff oversees the office’s entire operation. The chief of staff may sometimes handle a few policy issues, but generally his or her time is spent managing the office.

Tips on working with congressional staff

1. Remember, your issue is one of many

In a House office, each staff member might be assigned five to fifteen issues. Senate staff may specialize in a specific issue. Because someone is assigned a particular issue, however, does not mean that person is an expert. Generally, environmental LAs do not have degrees in ecology, health care LAs are not doctors, transportation LAs are not traffic engineers, etc. Rather, the issue area assignments help designate with whom the ecologists, doctors, and traffic engineers should talk about particular policy proposals. The staff person’s job is to sift through the information relevant to a particular issue or proposal—which can be a challenging task, as it often requires review of a broad range of information, including contradictory sources—to provide advice to the member on the policy issues for which that staff person is responsible.

2. Staff contact has advantages over member contact

Staff can take a little more time to delve into a particular issue and gain a greater understanding of why what you are proposing is such a great idea. With a little work on your part, they can become advocates for your cause within the congressional office.

3. Expect (and appreciate) youth

Most congressional staffers are rather young, but don’t let that throw you. In most cases, staffers are knowledgeable and capable individuals who can be trusted to respond appropriately to your requests and deliver your message to your representative or senator.

General tips for congressional meetings

Be on time

Staff and members often schedule their meetings in 20-minute increments, back-to-back. If you are late, expect to have your meeting shortened accordingly. You may even wind up losing your opportunity altogether and will need to reschedule. If you are part of a group and one of your meetings is running late, split up. It is better to have part of the group show up on time for the next appointment than to have everyone show up late.

1. Do not arrive too early

House and Senate offices typically do not have large waiting areas. If you arrive well ahead of your planned meeting, you may have to wait standing up or in the hallway. It is best to arrive about five minutes before the scheduled meeting time.

2. Be flexible

A number of things may happen that might seem unusual, like being asked to meet standing out in the hallway. The member may be called away to vote during your meeting. You may have a meeting scheduled with the member, but due to last-minute changes in the schedule, you may find you are meeting with a staff person.

- Hall meetings: Do not be insulted if the staff suggests a hall meeting. It simply means that either the office is too small for the number of people in your group or another meeting is already taking place in the available meeting space.

- Voting: You may find that the member has to leave in the middle of your meeting to go vote. If a vote is called, members have only about 15 minutes to get to the House or Senate floor and record their votes. No proxies are allowed, and if the vote closes before members make it to the floor, they are marked as “not voting.” Although this situation is difficult to avoid since votes can occur at any time, votes are generally less likely to occur before 11:00 a.m.

5. If you cannot attend, call the office to cancel

If you aren't able to make a particular meeting, and you are the only one who planned to go, it is common courtesy to cancel. If there are other people scheduled to go, check with them to make sure that someone will be attending.

6. The five-minute rule

You must prepare to deliver your message powerfully and effectively in no more than five minutes. With the possibility of votes, schedules running late, and last-minute emergencies, five minutes may be all the time you will have.

Top 10 List—Things elected officials' staff hate to hear

Number 10: But I thought my appointment was with the senator.

Never, ever indicate that you are disappointed to be meeting with a staff person. Having a good relationship with a staff person can make or break your cause.

Number 9: Here is some reading material for you—our 300-page report.

When meeting with a legislator or staff person, try to limit your leave-behind materials to one or two pages, and include details on where this information can be located online, if appropriate. Offering the information in a folder with your organization's name (if applicable) or the subject matter on the label will help ensure that the materials are kept and are accessible, rather than tossed on a pile, or worse.

Number 8: How much of a campaign contribution did your boss get to vote against (or for) this bill?

As indicated previously, most staff have no idea who contributed to their bosses' campaigns. Not only is this question insulting, but it is also futile, as the staff person is unlikely to know.

Number 7: I assume you know all about H.R. 1234.

With thousands of bills being introduced during each legislative session, no staff person will be able to keep them all straight. Always provide information on the bill title, number, and general provisions when communicating with a legislative office.

Number 6: No, I don't have an appointment, but I promise I will only take half an hour of your time.

If you were not able to get an appointment, it is acceptable to stop by, drop off some materials, and let them know of your interest in the issue. It is inappropriate to camp out in their doorway and demand that someone talk to you.

Number 5: No, I don't really need anything specific.

If you don't ask for something—a bill cosponsorship, a Congressional Record statement, or a meeting in the district, for example—some staff will wonder why you came by. Updates on your issue are fine, as long as they are accompanied by a request.

Number 4: We have 10 (or more) people in our group.

Capitol Hill offices are generally tiny. If you have more than five people in your group, you may end up standing out in the hallway. Plus, having so many people talking at once can dilute the impact of your message. Try to limit your group to no more than five. If your group is large, assign a few people (specifically constituents) the responsibility of delivering the message.

Number 3: What you are telling me cannot be right. I have heard/read otherwise.

Most staff and legislators will not lie to you. They know that lying will get them in trouble. Sometimes they may see things differently than you do, but if they say that a bill is definitely not going to be considered on the floor, or that there is no such legislation, you should believe them.

Number 2: What do you mean we have to stand in the hall?

See number 4. A request to meet in the hallway is simply an indication of space limitations.

Number 1: No, I don't represent anyone from your district/state. I just thought you would be interested in what I have to say. Legislators are elected to represent their constituents. If you are not their constituent or you are not connected to their constituents, you are not relevant to them. Some legislators do rise to higher positions of authority, but that just means they represent the additional interests of their committee or chamber, but they don't take on any new "constituents" per se. Your time is always best spent working with your own elected officials and turning them into advocates for your cause.

FOLLOWING UP

Follow-up is critical

Because you will likely have very limited time in meetings with an official or their staff, it simply will not be possible to relay everything you want them to know in that very short period of time. Plus, they likely will have questions about the issues you raise that you will need to answer. Most advocates don't follow up on these meetings, and then wonder why their legislators don't do what they were asked to do. This usually happens for one of three reasons:

- The elected official simply forgot—with dozens of requests a day, this
- happens often. The elected official has not had time to form an opinion on your question.
- The elected official is waiting to see how badly you want what you are asking for.

All three of these situations can be addressed with effective follow-up. You can remind the person with whom you met about your request, gently prod him/her to make a decision, and demonstrate your commitment to the cause.

Be diplomatic in reporting on your experience

Unless you are treated extremely rudely, do not bad-mouth the people with whom you met. It will inevitably get back to them, and they will not want to meet with you again or work together in the future.

Be patient and considerate

Even if you had a fabulous meeting, you should not expect an immediate response to your comments or concerns. Instead, make sure that you follow up with a thank you note or email to the staff person who met with you once you have asked what method of communication they prefer.

Keep in touch

To keep the momentum rolling after your meeting, follow up by sending small communications throughout the year. If you or your organization was written up in a local publication or online, share that story, and tie it back to the specific request you had for your legislator.

Of course, there is a difference between making relevant contact every few months and calling often just to chat. While it is important to stay on their radar screens, it is imperative not to be a pest. Keep your communications short and purposeful and you will be looked at as a resource, not a nuisance.

Become an ongoing resource

As stated above, staff are usually not experts on all issues, and they often turn to trusted outside experts when legislation that affects their constituents is on the table. Let staff know if you have done research on specific subjects or otherwise have experience or expertise in a given field. Knowing that someone in the district really understands an issue can be very helpful, as they will know whom to call for details needed to make informed decisions.

With thorough preparation, effective strategies for in-person communication, and appropriate follow-up, you can make a real difference in the legislative process. Establishing and maintaining contact with your elected officials is a crucial component of effective advocacy, and has the potential to tip the scales in favor of legislation you support.