

Communicating your Message

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Introduction

Patience and persistence are the primary characteristics of good advocates. Building relationships and credibility are key and can be accomplished with time and effort by following these guidelines:

Do:

- Do your homework -- know your district, the issues and your legislators.
- Develop rapport over time. Become a respected, informed and trusted voice.
- Treat the legislator with the same dignity and respect you would expect for yourself.
- Work with a legislator's staff. Staff members do research, draft bills make recommendations on amendments and develop expertise in areas in which their legislator cannot devote the time.
- Develop strong grassroots support. The more people there are forming the consensus that you speak for, the more impact you'll have.

Don't:

- Don't be rude, offensive or argumentative. A good guideline to follow is "Will the legislator invite me back or avoid me in the future?"
- Don't give an ultimatum. Learn to accept rejection without having it destroy a relationship; this week's enemy is often next week's ally.
- Don't ever resort to name calling. If you use strong negative labels for those who oppose your proposals, you may alienate them forever.
- Don't expect to change a legislator's mind immediately.
- Don't get frustrated. We can't expect victory overnight. We often have a difficult task and have to learn to rejoice in small victories.
- Don't take a shotgun approach. Focus on your priorities rather than trying to accomplish everything at once.

Building relationships and credibility with your legislator can be difficult if you don't communicate effectively what it is you want. This section provides a number of tips on phoning, writing and visiting with your legislators and their staff.

By Phone

Phone calls may be best when time is of the essence, when a bill is up for a vote in committee, for example. Phone calls can also be used immediately following a favorable vote to extend your appreciation.

- Ask to speak with the legislator, but if necessary, spend some time talking with the legislative staff person.
- Clearly identify yourself.
- If you have spoken to or seen the legislator recently, remind him or her of the contact. Legislators meet with many constituents and may not remember precisely when they saw or heard from them last. This can help to break the ice and lead into your reason for calling.
- Identify the specific proposal you are calling about, by bill number if possible. Call about only one or two issues at a time.
- Briefly state your position and how you'd like your legislator to vote.
- Ask your legislator's view on the issue or bill.
- If necessary, offer to provide information the legislator needs to make an informed decision on the issue.
- If the legislator is unsure of his or her position or vote, offer to follow up the phone call with another call or visit.

By Letter/Fax/E-mail

Putting your thoughts in writing is important when you are introducing a complicated topic. It will allow your

legislator time to mull over the issue before responding, and will help you to organize your thoughts so that you can explain them more clearly when you meet.

- Put your mailing address and phone number on all correspondence so that the legislator can easily contact you with questions or for more information.
- Do not use postcards.
- Keep your letters to one issue, short and to the point. Refer to the issue specifically or by bill number, if possible.
- Clearly state what it is you want them to do. Support a bill on the floor? Oppose a bill in committee? Draft a bill or an amendment?
- Offer specific information on why it is important. What is the bottom line on this issue for your district?
- Timing is critical. If the letter arrives too early, it may be forgotten before the vote. One or two days before the vote is taken is generally the best.
- Ask that the legislator state his or her position in the reply.
- Legislators appreciate thank you notes, as they often use them for materials for newsletters or other materials being mailed to constituents.

By Personal Visit

Visits are important on key issues when your legislators' votes really count. It is more difficult to say no in person than over the phone, or in a letter! They also serve to keep you in mind as a source of information if your legislators can put a specific issue together with your name and face.

- Call their office or send them a fax before your visit. Let them know specifically what you wish to speak to them about, and offer them two or three alternative times you are available.
- Address legislators as "Representative" or "Senator".
- Legislators are often between votes and your time with them is limited. Get to the point or you may miss your opportunity.
- Be prepared when you arrive. Do your homework in advance so you can speak clearly and concisely on the issue.
- Have something in writing to leave behind with the legislator, preferably a one-page fact sheet on your issue and position.
- Always thank legislators for their time and express interest in keeping in touch, even if they disagree with your position this time.