

Communicating with Legislators

Tips and Tactics

Identify Your Legislator

It helps to know as much as you can about your legislator before contacting him or her. You never know when you'll find something in common to build a relationship from, such as a shared hometown or college. Brief biographical information and a list of legislators' committee assignments can be found on the web at www.leg.mn. "Green books" or "red books" also contain this information, and can be requested (for free!) from the House (651-296-2146) and Senate (651-296-0504) information offices.

If you aren't sure which district you're in, the "district finder" is an easy way to find out: www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/districtfinder.asp.

Making Phone Calls

Phone calls are a great way to express opinions to legislators throughout the course of a legislative session. They complement and reinforce the relationships you've developed through face to face meetings. They require relatively little preparation, and keep you engaged on a consistent basis. Once again, prepare with the intent of being as concise and effective as possible:

1. State your name and address, and indicate that you are a constituent.
2. Give the name and House or Senate File number of the bill you are calling about, or clearly explain the issue that concerns you. Include a statement on how the issue affects you personally.
3. State whether you oppose or support the legislation and how you want your legislator to vote.
4. You will usually be speaking with a secretary or aide who tracks the "pro or con" calls on particular bills. The call needs to last only a short time. Keep it under five minutes unless the aide or legislator prolongs the conversation.
5. Listen politely to the legislator's point of view (which the aid will oftentimes state).
6. Take down the name of the aide with whom you spoke so that you will have a contact person when you need to contact the legislator again.
7. Thank them for their time, both on the telephone and with a note of thanks for the conversation that includes a concise summary of your opinion.
8. Do not call too often and risk becoming a nuisance.
9. Do not lie or try to talk your way around questions to which you do not know the answers. Say that you will get back to the legislator or aide, and then do so.

Writing Letters

Letters are another important tool for social justice advocacy. Many of the same rules apply to letter writing as with other forms of communication with legislators:

1. Use the correct address and salutation (i.e., Dear Senator ____, or Dear Representative ____, or Dear Governor ____). While the legislature is in session, send letters to Senate or House offices.
2. Identify the bill by House or Senate file number, or clearly describe the issue.

3. Be brief and clear. Write about one issue per letter. State the issue and how you want your elected official to vote in your first sentence. Letters should be no longer than one page.
4. Be specific. Explain how the issue affects people in your district.
5. Be timely. Make sure your legislator will have sufficient time to consider your request prior to casting a vote on the bill.
6. Know your facts. Inaccurate or misleading information will hurt your credibility.
7. Be polite in your requests for support or opposition. Never express anger, make demands, or threaten defeat at the next election. You will want to have future contact with the legislator.
8. Use your own words and stationery rather than form letters or postcards. In addition, write legibly or type – your letter could be discarded if it's difficult to read.
9. Be constructive. Explain an alternative or better solution to the problem and offer to be a resource on the issue.
10. Send a note of appreciation when your elected official supports your issue. When he or she does not support your issue, explain why you think a different decision should have been made. It might make a difference the next time.

Emailing

First, a word of caution about contacting your legislators via e-mail:

While sending an email message to a legislator may be more convenient for you than mailing a hand-written letter, contacting legislators electronically may not be as effective a tool in making your voice heard. E-mail communications draw mixed reactions from public officials. Many legislators resent broadcast e-mails that clog their mailboxes. Others may not check their incoming messages themselves. This means that your e-mail message may be one of hundreds that a busy staff member in your legislator's office must read, process, and forward on to the legislator. Therefore, before sending a letter electronically, call and ask your elected officials whether they use their e-mail and whether a letter sent via e-mail would be effective and appreciated.

There are, of course, times when electronic correspondence is recommended. E-mail your letter when:

- Time is clearly an issue (i.e., if a letter sent by U.S. mail will not reach your legislator in time for an important hearing or vote).
- Your legislator has requested information from you and will be expecting to receive it quickly.

Follow the same guidelines in writing an e-mail message that you would for a hand-written or typed letter on your own letterhead or stationery.

Writing a Letter to The Editor: Some Helpful Hints

Letters to the editor are another way to communicate with legislators; they have the added benefit of connecting with the “general public” as well. In fact, the “Letters to the Editor” page is among the most widely read. Enough letters on a given topic demonstrate broad community support for a particular position or issue. The following are guidelines for submitting letters to the editor:

Write a Letter to the Editor...

- Anytime you feel passionately about an issue.
- Especially when you have a personal story to share related to a particular issue.
- Especially when you want to influence legislators other than your own.
- Especially when you want to influence broader public opinion.

What Should I Say in My Letter?

- Letters to the editor should be short and punchy. 100-200 words or less is best!
- Before you begin writing, think to yourself: What message do I want people to hear, and what is the best way to convey that message?
- Mention your reason for writing in the first sentence. Be as specific about the issue as you can.
- Limit the content of your letter to one or two key points. Remember: this is a concise statement on one subject, not an in-depth analysis.
- Stay positive. It is tempting to write an angry letter in response to something you’ve read. Don’t! People will respond better to a more positive approach. So instead of saying that the legislature’s vote on health care makes you mad, say, “I expect the legislature to take a stand so that all of us can enjoy access to health care.”
- Take a strong position without alienating potential readers. Include fresh facts you haven’t seen elsewhere in the press, honest statements of opinion, creativity, and humor.

How Do I Increase My Chances of Getting a Letter Published?

- Convince other social justice advocates, friends, and family to write letters about the same issue. A number of letters on the same issue signals that the issue is important, and increases the likelihood that at least one gets published.
- Respond quickly. If you see a story in the media you want to respond to, try to email or fax your letter by the next day at the latest.
- Include your name, address, email and telephone. Only your name and city will be published. Editors want the other information so they can contact you to verify that you are the author of the letter.
- Make sure your letters get into the right hands. Call your paper and ask for the name and correct contact information of the person to whom you should mail, email, or fax the letter.
- Avoid letters with more than one signatory. These rarely get published.