

Communicating With Your Legislators

Developing a personal relationship with the legislators from your own area is one of the most effective ways of influencing public policy. To develop that relationship you're going to use a variety of techniques including personal meetings, telephone calls, letters, e-mails, faxes, and public opinion messages (POM's). These people are public servants and are elected to represent you in making and shaping public policy. Relationship building starts from the moment the legislator is elected and continues throughout their term. Communication is NOT limited to occurring just during the legislative session.

Personal Meetings

As soon as election results are made public, plan a "Mom and Apple Pie" meeting with the newly elected (or re-elected) legislators. These don't have to be fancy or elaborate, but do have a couple of key elements:

- Send a congratulatory letter and invitation to the legislator. Be specific about the date and time and ask for a call to reschedule if it doesn't work into their schedule. Send the letter at least three weeks before the proposed gathering.
- Refreshments can be something light like cookies and coffee, or some other sweet treat.
- Invite other community members, especially people with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities.
- Keep the tone light. You want the legislator to leave with a positive impression and appreciation for some of the issues important for people with disabilities.
- Immediately following your Mom & Apple Pie gathering encourage all attendees to write a handwritten note to the legislator thanking them for their time.

Visits to the legislator's office are also effective, whether in Juneau while in session or in their home communities. You definitely should make an appointment in advance. Legislative staff may ask how long you think you will need to discuss your issue. In that case, request a half hour. During the hectic, closing days of a session, request 15 minutes. REMEMBER: You are competing with many others for a legislator's time. Be considerate. In some cases, a legislative staff will tell you how much time you may have. Always take what you can get. Avoid just dropping by the legislator's office. He or she may be occupied and it may raise havoc with the daily schedule. Generally, you will be worked in, but staff will not be thrilled. However, constituents are an exception and can usually be worked in somehow.

Be prepared for the visit. You may want to practice with another person before hand.

When you do meet with the legislator:

- start by introducing yourself. Give your name, city or town, and organization if you are representing one.
- Avoid too much chitchat and remain focused. If you are visiting about a specific bill have a copy available and tell him or her the status of it.
- Explain your position on the bill. Whether you support it or are against it, have information to back up your stand. That information can be objective data (facts and figures) or may be anecdotal information. If you don't know the answer to a

question, just say so. Don't pretend to know it all. Make a note to get back to the legislator later with the answer.

- Ask the legislator whether or not he/she will support the bill. It may feel awkward, but you need to determine the extent of support the bill has. Tell supporters how much you appreciate their stand. If they don't support the bill they need to know that, although you disagree with them, you respect their stand—and even understand their wish or need to oppose your position, in some cases. Fence-sitters pose a bigger challenge. If the legislator won't give you their position, ask if you can provide additional information to help them make a decision. In all cases, be pleasant, courteous, and non-confrontational.
- Make sure you leave on friendly terms. Even if they don't support you this time, another issue in the future may require their support.
- Write a follow up thank you letter. If there were questions you needed to research further, include the responses and supporting information.

Telephone Calls

The power of a personal call cannot be understated. In general, calls from constituents are most effective, telephone “blitzes” are least. It's important to understand that the legislator may not be available to take your call personally, especially during the legislative session. In that case make sure to leave a brief message with a staff person. Ask to speak with the aide who handles the issue to which you wish to comment. Make your call brief and convey the following in your message:

- Identify yourself with your name and your city or town;
- If your call is regarding a specific bill, give the bill number and subject matter;
- State your support (or opposition) to the bill and a brief reason for your position;
- Request the legislator's support (or opposition) to the bill;
- Request a return call to discuss it further, if desired;
- Leave your telephone number, and
- Express your thanks.

Letters, e-mails, and faxes

One of the best ways to get your point of view to your elected officials is through a personal letter. Elected officials pay particular attention to letters from constituents- your letters can and do make a difference.

Although hundreds of letters may be received each week, many elected officials read a significant portion of their mail personally. Others ask their staff to select the most interesting and revealing letters. Legislative offices keep a running tally of how their mail is running on particular issues. Remember, your letters count!

Tips On Writing Your Legislator

Use personal stationery when writing lawmakers. If you're writing on behalf of your company and at its request, use company stationery. Include your return address on the

letter, if it is not on your letterhead. Sometimes envelopes with your address on them will be lost.

Address your letter correctly. At the state level you should address your letter as follows:

To a representative:
Honorable (legislator name)
State Capitol Bldg., Rm. (rm.#)
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

To a senator:
Honorable (legislator name)
State Capitol Bldg., Rm. (rm.#)
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Dear Representative (name):

Dear Senator (name):

Note: When writing to the Chair of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, it is proper to address them as: "Dear Mr. Chairman," "Dear Madam Chairwoman" or "Dear Mr. Speaker."

Identify yourself as a registered voter from a specified town or village. Identify any other personal or professional relationships that will lend weight and credibility to your position on the issue.

State the purpose of your correspondence in the first paragraph of the message. If your message pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly, i.e., House bill: H.R. _____, Senate bill: S. _____.

Get to the point quickly, and address only one issue in each message. As a rule of thumb, it is best to limit your message to one page.

State your concerns about the issue, explain how the issue would affect you, your family, your livelihood, as well as any specific impact it would have on your community or state.

Praise, don't criticize. If your lawmaker's position agrees with your own, don't spare the praise. When it conflicts with your view, be courteous while stating your beliefs and request that the lawmaker reconsider his or her position. Explain why it is wrong and suggest alternatives.

Ask for a commitment. Be sure to ask for a clear statement of their position on a bill or issue. Stand out from the crowd by asking for specific actions and real commitments. If you get a noncommittal response, write again.

Be even-handed. Take time to contact your elected officials when you approve of their actions as well as when you wish to voice your opposition or ask for their assistance. Always write to thank them for positive action on a previous request.

Make sure it's readable. Type, print or write legibly. Avoid cliches and industry jargon. Give your address and phone number and be sure to sign the letter.

Avoid form letters. Please create your own letters, using the ideas suggested to you by the organization that has issued the action call, or other source. Communications written in your own words that reflect your own personality and expertise are much more effective.

Say "thanks." Close with a statement of thanks and an expression of continued interest in future action.

The same guidelines apply to faxes and e-mails, however a handwritten letter is usually more powerful.

Public Opinion Messages (POM's)

POM's are one of the most commonly used forms of communication during the legislative session. Forms can be obtained on-line or at your local Legislative Information Office (LIO). They can be phoned, faxed, or delivered to the LIO and are limited to 50 words. You have the opportunity to send the message to specific legislators, committees, or caucuses. Draft your message before completing the form to get the most mileage from your 50 words. Again, an individual message is more effective than a group sending the same message.

In closing...

As a rule stay in contact with your legislator every four to six weeks using any of the communication methods suggested. Make your communications relevant. For example, if you are concerned about funding for special education, invite your legislator to join you for a school board meeting or IEP meeting. The goal here is to assist policy makers in being aware of how their decisions impact the lives of people with disabilities. They were elected by you, have an obligation to represent you, and you have a right to have your voice heard by them.