

GUIDELINES FOR AN EFFECTIVE MEETING WITH A LEGISLATOR

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http://www.acc.org/advocacy/state_center/resources_calling.htm

<http://www.miaflcio.org/Legislative/Lobbying.htm>

<http://www.vscpa.com/Advocacy/tips.htm>

http://www.birf.info/artman/publish/printer_314.shtml

<http://www.minurses.org/gov/commleg.html>

Effective communication with legislators is the backbone of every successful legislative initiative. Seldom do we see legislation pass without some need to educate legislators about an issue, and it's no wonder. There are literally hundreds of pieces of legislation introduced during a legislative session - and they vary from agricultural issues to zebra mussels.

Legislators rely on informed citizens to help them identify key issues and positions on those issues. Your communication, or lobbying, helps the legislator receive a variety of input on an issue - and it is crucial to have our voices heard in Boston and Washington!

The goal in communicating with the legislator is to receive the highest possible level of attention, so preferred methods (in decreasing order) are: personal visit, handwritten letter, electronic letter or telephone call. In this day and age, the longer you take to state your case, the more weight is placed on your effort. In other words, if you care enough to visit your legislator's office or send a handwritten letter, you must be very concerned about the issue.

Preparation for a Meeting

- Try to make an appointment; in some offices this is essential. If possible call a week or two in advance. If that is not possible, you still may be able to see your legislator or have an in depth meeting with his or her aide. When making an appointment the lawmaker's staff may ask you to outline the purpose of the meeting, provide a list of who will be with you and how long the meeting will take. They will also ask whether you represent a group or political action committee. These are standard questions they ask everyone. Having information listed below before hand allows the staff member to pull the bill for the lawmaker so he/she can be ready for your meeting by giving him/her a chance to review it.
- Identify yourself as a constituent (a resident of the legislator's district) when you call.
- Immediately establish what you are calling about, and what you would like the legislator to do (i.e. improve a state service, support or oppose a bill). Know the following before calling for an appointment or going to the legislator's office: **The bill's number, The short title, The sponsor, Where and when the bill is considered, Why you oppose or support the bill**

- You should prepare materials, like a fact sheet, to leave with the lawmaker or his/her aide. The more information you provide them the better. However, this information should be clear and to the point. A fact sheet should address exclusively the purpose for which you meet. Two concise, well-written, pages will go further than a ream of nothing special. It should be set up in short paragraphs with subheadings, so each point is easy to find.
- Work out a brief written script or list of talking points to use when for your meeting. This will help give you confidence and keep you focused. If possible, role-play the meeting. Expect brief meetings.
- Know the issue. Although you do not need to be an expert on every aspect of a bill, you need to know enough about the issue it is intended to resolve. You don't have to be an expert on the issue, but you do have to know it well enough to explain it intelligently.
- Familiarize yourself with your opponents' arguments against your position and develop reasonable responses to them.
- Don't be surprised if you don't get an appointment with the legislator directly. If you can speak at length with an aide, keep in mind that he/she serve as the ears of a legislator, and have more time to look into your issue. What you say and how you say it will make a difference in how the staffer conveys your message.
- If you cannot get to the Statehouse office most lawmakers will find the time to meet with you in their district office. Be sure you make the office aware of your dilemma if you cannot get to Boston. The best time to make a district office visit to get to know a lawmaker is while the Legislature is not in session. In the less harried atmosphere, you can make your lawmaker aware of your activism and your issues without having the pressure of pending legislation involved.

Remember: Professionalism Politeness Precision During Your Meeting

- Maintain a professional appearance and attitude. Dress in business attire or "dress casual."
- Be prepared to wait. Legislators' schedules are unpredictable.
- Greet the legislator with a firm handshake. Clearly introduce yourself and/or your delegation.
- Begin your meeting, if possible, in an area of mutual agreement. Start off by thanking the legislator for a recent vote, Sponsorship of another bill or for his/her voting record in the last legislative session, but exchange only the briefest of pleasantries and get down to business. Get to the main purpose of your visit in the first few minutes.

- Project an image of self-confidence. Be assertive in your delivery.
- Be yourself. Speak in a clear manner that invites questions. Present your stand on the bill and explain your position.
- Make no assumptions about their level of knowledge of your issue.
- Try to personalize the issue. Give examples of how the issue has or will affect you, your co-workers or your community. Tell why you feel the way you do.
- Discuss issues without lecturing. Keep in mind that your position on an issue isn't the only one being lobbied. Therefore, allow time for genuine give and take between you and the legislator.
- Do not monopolize the conversation; allow the legislator time to ask you questions. You may be the only consumer contact they have about a bill. You may have more influence than a legislator's colleague or a lobbyist when you use the correct approach.
- If the legislator asks you about the bill and you do not know the answer, be honest and tell him/her you do not know. Then tell the legislator you would be glad to try to find the answer and get back with him/her. Never speculate, generalize or guess.
- Frame your message in terms of local effect. Hearing how an issue affects the community's constituents and the economy of the legislator's district may have a greater impact on the legislator than hearing how it affects the state generally. S/he serves the district and the constituents are the people that keep him or her in office!
- A lawmaker may offer an opinion about a bill or explain his/her position. If you know who opposes your view, state why you differ with the opposition on the bill. Do not bad mouth the opposition or tell the lawmaker what you think of them and their views. Simply state why you feel differently about the issue.
- If you bring other people to your appointment, or if you are part of a group, keep these points in mind. Decide who will be the main speaker for your group. Others may add comments or information, but one person should speak for the group. Arrive at a consensus before the meeting to avoid giving mixed messages.
- Never verbally attack a lawmaker him/her for how he/she voted on a certain bill. The legislator who is your enemy today may be your best friend the next time you need a vote on a bill. The best time to address past differences with a lawmaker is in the voting booth. Keep in mind that what you say, and how you say it, may

influence the way a lawmaker votes on a bill. Using threatening or abusive language only leaves the lawmaker with a negative view of your opinion. Although it is appropriate to disagree with the positions held by a legislator, it is not appropriate to let that disagreement be evidenced by anger, rudeness, or disrespect.

- Never identify yourself as a spokesperson for any group unless you are. Never, under any circumstances, state your opinion as policy or an official stand of any group unless they authorize you to act as a spokesperson for that group.
- When you leave the meeting, be sure the legislator knows your position and the expectations you have of him or her. Ask the legislator for a specific commitment to a specific course of action- to vote for or against a bill, to introduce legislation, to cosponsor a bill, to lobby another legislator, etc., but do not push a lawmaker to take a stand on the bill during your meeting. Most lawmakers won't anyway. You will do more harm than good.
- Make sure you hear what was actually said not what you want to hear. Failure to do this may get you nothing more than meaningless political platitudes or proclamations that will not translate into the desired legislative action by the lawmaker.

Perseverance After Your Meeting

- Follow-up is crucial in the lobbying process. Sometimes you won't get an immediate commitment from a legislator at your lobbying encounter. How thoroughly you follow up that meeting with additional correspondence, facts or figures may help determine the final position of that legislator.
- Send a follow-up letter to show your appreciation for the time the legislator spent with you. In addition to expressing your appreciation, take the opportunity to highlight the key points of your message and the action you are requesting the legislator to take. Finally, send any additional information that you said you would provide.
- If the legislator votes in the way you requested, or helps in the progress through committees, etc. write to him/her expressing your appreciation.
- Remember that compromise is part of the legislative process. Know when it's necessary to compromise and how much to sacrifice, while still achieving legislative progress.