



Tips on Writing, Calling, or Visiting Your Legislator Afterschool and Youth Advocacy Day, 2009

There are three basic ways to communicate your views: you can write, you can call, or you can visit. And there are always three audiences for your letters, calls and visits. The first is policy makers and their staff; the second audience is other voters; and the third is the media.

1. Writing a Legislator or Policy Maker

Politicians and other decision-makers pay attention to their mail. Most offices keep a running tally of the regular mail coming in; it helps them know what their constituents care about. Responding to concerned citizens is good politics and crucial to survival. Every letter counts, but a personal letter is always more effective than a form letter or petition.

Most state legislators say 10-15 letters on a single issue will get their attention. To a part-time legislator with little or no paid staff, three or four dozen letters loom very large. The same is true for agency officials, county commissioners, and city council members. Your letters do not need to be on fancy stationery or written in technical, legal language. At a time when mass-produced letters are common, handwritten notes are often the most powerful. A rough letter, any letter, is always better than no letter at all.

E-mail is a bit of a special case. Two practical pieces of advice should be followed. First, keep in mind that elected officials are like any other group: some are comfortable with e-mail others are not. Just ask.

Letters/e-mails to policy makers (all levels) should:

- Be concise, informed, and polite (do not threaten, do not be rude);
- Be brief (1-2 pages, a few paragraphs) and legible;
- State your purpose in the first paragraph;
- Include your full name and home address.
- If your letter is about a bill, budget item, or specific policy:
- Cite the bill, policy, or budget item (by name or number if you know it, or just stated clearly if you do not); if you plan to mention two issues/bills - state that up front;
- Say whether you support or oppose it, and briefly why;
- Be factual and speak from your own experience or knowledge;
- Ask for their views on the issue or bill.

2. Calling a Legislator or Policy Maker

Politicians and decision-makers also pay attention when citizens take the trouble to call and convey their views, and the same general rules apply. Let them know concisely: who you are, what you are calling about, and what you want from them (e.g., support for a bill, opposition to a budget cut, action on a proposal). If there is a message machine, state who you are, what you want them to support or reject, and then spell out your name and address. Elected officials like phone conversations because they provide instant feedback. Always follow a phone call with a note.

Note: Calls are an especially good task for the politically shy because as often as not, a receptionist, operator, or machine answers the call. Callers just need to leave a brief message, name, address, and/or phone number. No questions are asked; no positions are challenged.

3. Visiting a Legislator or Policy Maker

Elected officials can be visited on the job, back home in their local offices, or whenever they are engaged in public business (e.g., at a rally or parade, at a fundraiser or speech appearance, in the statehouse corridors, or at a town hall meeting). When the legislature is in session, about the only occasions that are "off limits" are those which are obviously personal or family occasions.

Often you will only get a few minutes to make your point so it helps to have ready a short, 90-second version of what you want to say (something you can say in the time it takes to shake hands or walk someone to the elevator). And it is always smart to use that 90-second version first thing; if there is time, follow that with more details - like the impact in the legislator's district, or a more elaborate version of your message.

A visit to a policy maker should always include five things:

- Who you are and where you live (so they know you have the butter); I'm Kim Q Citizen, and I live in your district.
- Any group you belong to which is working on the issue.
- What you came to talk about - in just a phrase or a few words;
- What you want them to do (please VOTE FOR... please OPPOSE...).
- Something in writing - a fact sheet or brief explanation of how the issue is important to their legislative or congressional district - with your name, address, phone number and e-mail address.

However you go about it, it helps to remember two things:

One: Just ask! Policy makers will not think you rude for stating what you want, and may think it odd if you do not. Part of their job is to be asked, and part of our job is to ask. In a representative democracy like ours, we have to tell our elected representatives how we wish to be represented.

Two: You cannot be persuasive if you are not understood. To avoid misunderstandings, avoid jargon, technical terms, or initials; be prepared to go over the basics if necessary.

SOME GOOD ADVICE:

General Tips for Communicating with Legislators

- **Know your issue!** When you are speaking with your legislator, know facts, figures and what step the budget process is at.
- **Know your Legislators!** Find out what issues are important to your legislators, what their interests are and who are their allies.
- **Have a goal!** Be sure to know what the goal of your conversation is with your legislator. It's a good idea to have a strategy mapped out in advance that will lead you to your outcome.
- **Say "please" and "thank you!"** Remember to thank your legislator for taking the time to talk with you and send him or her a follow up thank you card. Courtesy goes a long way!
- **Honesty is the best policy!** If you don't know the answer to a question, it's okay to say you "don't know." Just remember to tell your legislator you will follow up with him or her at a later time.
- **Argue your point!** It's okay to argue your point, but do not be abrasive. Defend your point calmly and intelligently.
- **It's okay if your Legislator doesn't have a position on your issue yet!** There's no need to pressure your legislator to give you an opinion at that very moment. Just remember to follow up with him or her later to see if they've come to any conclusions.
- **Don't write off your legislator if he or she doesn't agree with you!** Your legislator may not agree with you now, but there is the possibility that they he or she could change their mind later.
- **Keep your promises!** Never say you will do something for a legislator and then not do it. If you tell your legislator you will follow up with him or her, be sure to do it! Be reliable. It will help you build a trustworthy relationship with your legislator.
- **Timing, timing, timing!** *When* you speak with your legislator is a very important aspect of communicating well with you legislator. If you catch your legislator at the right time, you can have an even greater impact!