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ADVOCATING YOUR CONCERNS TO CONGRESS

There are many ways in which you, as a member of the electorate, can contact your federally elected representatives to let them know of your concerns, priorities, needs and desires. Regardless of which method you choose to contact them, always remember to be polite, make a cogent and assertive (yet respectful) argument, and always ask for a reply or response. It also helps to always transmit something in writing, so that they have a record of your interests and ask for a written response in return so you have an indisputable record of their positions and promises.

PERSONAL VISIT

For most members of the House and Senate, the best way to communicate with them is a personal visit. A face-to-face meeting may be the most effective way to communicate your concerns to legislators. You can visit alone, but because it's more enjoyable and effective to visit with others, the description below assumes that you're visiting with one or more other people.



How Frequently Should You Visit?

Once or twice a year is probably as much as a Member of Congress will see you. State legislators are more accessible. If you represent an active group of voters, all legislators are more likely to see you than if you go alone. It is more effective to help other people to visit than to try to go frequently yourself.

How Many People Should Go On a Visit?

You can go alone, although two to five people will fit comfortably in most D.C. and local offices. Fewer people allow more discussion; large groups tend to allow the legislator to dominate and give speeches.

How To Visit

Five steps to remember when planning your visit are: make the appointment, prepare, visit, de-brief, follow-up.

STEP 1: MAKE THE APPOINTMENT

Call the legislator's office and make an appointment: Get the local office number from the telephone book (look under the legislator's name). Get a Member of Congress' D.C. number by calling the Capitol Switchboard in D.C. (202/224-3121).

Ask to speak to the appointment secretary. Ask for a meeting. State the issue you want to discuss, how many people will be coming, whether you represent a group, preferred dates for visiting, and how long you want to speak with the Member. Most Members of Congress will also ask that a letter be faxed or mailed to their office with the same information, so you may want to have that letter prepared in advance.

HINT:

THE EARLIER YOU CALL, THE MORE LIKELY YOU ARE TO GET A DATE YOU WANT. It often takes weeks to get an appointment with a Member of Congress.

Most visits run between 10 and 30 minutes, but don't hesitate to ask for more, especially if you're visiting the legislator during a work day in their office. Write down the appointment secretary's name for future use.

You may be told that the legislator cannot meet with you, or cannot see you for months. Just repeat your request. Say, "That seems like a very long time. Could you please arrange an earlier date?" They may say they'll call you back. Call back in a week if you haven't heard from them. If after several calls you still didn't have an appointment, find several community leaders, such as clergy, business or labor leaders, or professionals, to join you. Invite other groups (another congregation's social concerns committee or a community organization) to join you. Have them call or write using letterhead to request a meeting.

If this doesn't work, ask to speak to the Administrative Assistant (the Legislator's right-hand staff person). Be polite, no matter how abrupt or rude staff are. In fact, their rudeness increases your leverage: they've done you wrong, and owe it to you to give you some time. As a last resort, write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper to draw attention to the legislator's inaccessibility for

average voters. (Be cautious; this could antagonize the legislator. Just state the facts and express your dismay that the legislator will not make time to see constituents who advocate for the public good.)

You can visit legislators either in Washington, D.C. or in a local office. The legislator may be more available back home, and more people can participate. However, there's nothing like a visit to the capital to de-mystify the legislature and help people overcome their fear of advocacy. Furthermore, staff who work on the issues are at the legislature, and building a relationship with them may be a key to success.



If a trip to Washington is not in your future, you can try to meet with your Congressperson at home: many members go home for most weekends, and there are traditional “district work periods” around most holidays (i.e., Memorial Day, Labor Day and the Fourth of July) in the early spring and for the month of August. Many members can also be found in their home districts after Congress adjourns for the year, usually in October or November. Many members also hold “town meetings” in their districts throughout the year; you can call their district offices to ask if one is planned for your area, and if so when it will be.

STEP 2: PREPARE

1. ESTABLISH A PROFILE OF THE MEMBER YOU ARE GOING TO MEET. Review the legislator’s voting record, look up the committees and subcommittees the legislator serves on. If you have access to the Internet, look up his or her web site (www.house.gov or www.senate.gov) and review the past press releases. The press releases will give you a sense of what he or she has been doing to date; the committee and subcommittee assignments should give you insight into the issues the legislator tends to be more involved in. Can you relate your concerns to the committee assignments?

2. DECIDE WHAT YOUR MESSAGE WILL BE.

Choose no more than two issues. Make a list of “key points” and include ways that constituents are affected.

3. DECIDE WHO WILL SAY WHAT.

Who will start the meeting to say why you've come?

Who will state each key point?

Who will ask which questions?

Who will ask the legislator to take specific action?

Who will thank the legislator at the end of the visit?



People don't have to talk in order to go on the visit, but it's better to share the communicating -- it shows the Member that everyone thinks for themselves. Be prepared to explain (in one sentence) any bills you refer to; the Member may not be familiar with the bill or when it is scheduled for a vote.

Do a dry run, with each person briefly stating their part of the message. You'll discover where there is confusion and overlap of points.

Visits may be cut short. Be prepared to state your message and make your request in a few minutes.

4. PREPARE RESPONSES.

How do you expect the legislator to respond?

Prepare answers.

5. TAKE A FACT SHEET, NEWSPAPER ARTICLE OR ANY SUPPORTING INFORMATION THAT SUPPORTS YOUR VIEW.

Give it to the legislator at the end of the meeting.

6. DECIDE WHAT SPECIFIC ACTION YOU WANT.

STEP 3: VISIT

1. TAKE THE INITIATIVE. Say why you're there. Everyone introduce themselves. Mention your profession, background, and any experience on the issue. Mention organizations that you belong to.

2. THANK THE LEGISLATOR FOR SOMETHING -- a vote, a speech, an electoral promise or their willingness to hear constituents' views.

3. MENTION A PAST VOTE ON YOUR ISSUE. This shows that you follow how they vote and know that votes count, not promises! If no vote has been taken, try to determine if the legislator has ever taken a position on your issue (such as co-sponsoring legislation, etc.)

4. STATE YOUR MESSAGE BRIEFLY AND SUCCINCTLY. State your view, your reasons for having that view ("key points"), and other constituents who share your view (including organizations). [Lobbyists use a single page of "talking points" to help them state key points briefly.]

5. ASK FOR A SPECIFIC ACTION. Be sure to ask how they plan to vote. If they say that the bill is being rewritten or amended, ask for the legislator's position on the bill as originally written. **KEEP ASKING UNTIL YOU GET SOME ANSWER.** If they don't have a position, ask how they plan to decide.

6. If time, ASK FOR INFORMATION. (See "Sample Questions").

Sample Questions

When you visit a legislator, try to learn about their attitudes and who is lobbying them.

1. Are you hearing from people who disagree with our position? Who? What are their arguments? How much pressure are they putting on you?
2. What do you consider when deciding how to vote on this issue. What sources of information do you rely on?
3. We have found the following sources of information useful. Do you see them as credible? If not, why?
4. What would lead you to change your mind on this issue?
5. Would you take leadership on this issue if you had more support from constituents?

VISITORS TO D.C.: ASK TO MEET STAFF WHO WORK ON ISSUES YOU FOLLOW. Use time waiting for the Member to get to know issue staff. If the Member is unable to meet with you, carry on the meeting with the staff person. They are worth your time! They help the Member decide how to vote.

STEP 4: DE-BRIEF

Learn from the visit and decide what to do next. If you visited as a group, go to a place where you can sit together and talk. (Do it now while everything is fresh).

1. Quick Impressions: Each person takes a turn filling in the sentence, "I feel _____ about the meeting because _____." If some people dominate, say, "You're saying important things, but let's hear from everyone quickly."
2. What went well? Make a list together. No negative comments!
3. How did the Legislator or staff person respond to the group? Non-committal, bored, interested, hostile, encouraging, defensive, uncomfortable. . .? How can you tell? (Body language? Words? Tone of voice? Short meeting?)
4. What did you learn about the legislator? Any insights into their "world view," motivation to be in politics, feelings about your issues, feelings about you as constituents, reliance on staff for information, or methods for handling meetings with constituents? [If you met with staff, did she/he give you insights about the legislator? Did staff tell you about the legislator's views or voting behavior?]
5. What should the next step be? (Letters? Media? Another visit?)
6. Who will send a follow-up letter to the legislator or staff to thank them for the meeting and restate key points?

STEP 5: FOLLOW-UP

1. Write a letter to the legislator or staff person, thanking them for the meeting, briefly restating key points and reminding them of commitments they made.

2. If you promised to do something, do it. It's important to your credibility.
3. Report on the visit to your organization, congregation, or other interested group. Ask people to write a letter (mentioning that you briefed them). Bring paper, envelopes, stamps, and pens.
4. Call local media groups to report what happened in your visit.

If a meeting with a legislator is not in your future, there are other ways to contact your elected representatives:

WRITE A LETTER

Because office visits are sometimes difficult to schedule, especially in a timely manner, letter writing is usually the next best option. There are several ways of communicating through the mail with your elected representative; a hand written letter, a form letter, a post card or a petition. Hand written (or personalized typed / computer written) letters are usually the best, since they convey to your elected representative that this issue is important enough to you that you took the time to write a personal letter. Short of that, a form letter is also effective. Postcards and petitions can also be useful in making a point, especially if you have large numbers of people sending in the same postcards or signing the petition.



When writing to your Representative, you should address the letter to:

The Honorable _____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

NOTE: *when writing to members of the House of Representatives in Washington, all you need is their name and the zip code "20515." Room numbers and street addresses are not that useful, as the mail sorters do not use them since Members tend to move offices frequently.*

When writing to your Senators, you should address the letter to:

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

NOTE: *when writing to members of the US Senate in Washington, all you need is their name and the zip code "20510." Room numbers and street addresses are not that useful, as the mail sorters do not use them since Members tend to move offices frequently.*

Hint

For all your written correspondence it is usually a good idea to put a reference line (i.e., RE: SUPPORT FOR HATE CRIMES PREVENTION LEGISLATION) near the top of your letter (above the salutation), so the subject of your letter is never in doubt. Also, you should always ask for a response near the end of your letter indicating the member's position on the issue, and what he/she intends to do.

ON ALL WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE, YOU SHOULD ALSO ALWAYS BE SURE TO INCLUDE A SIGNATURE AND PRINT YOUR NAME LEGIBLY, AS WELL AS YOUR ADDRESS SO THAT YOU CAN RECEIVE A RESPONSE.

Unfortunately, in these days of anthrax and other types of terrorism, it can take up to two weeks for letters to reach members of Congress, since each letter must first be irradiated and cleared. Thus, if you are writing about an urgent matter, it might be a good idea to also fax your letter, make a phone call, or send an e-mail as well.

MAKE A PHONE CALL

To contact your Representatives / Senators in their district offices, you can begin by looking up their phone number in the phone book, usually in the blue section under "US Government Offices." You can also look on the internet at www.house.gov or www.senate.gov.

To contact your Representatives / Senators in their Washington, DC office, you can dial the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask to be patched through to your Senators / Representative.



In every case, when you call your Representative or Senators, you should always be polite, speak clearly, and leave your name and address and ask for a response.

SEND AN E-MAIL

While not all Representatives / Senators have e-mail addresses, and some still do not consider e-mails an important form of constituent correspondence, many are becoming more and more responsive to e-mails and their constituents who use them.



To find out if your Representative has an e-mail address go to www.house.gov and click on either “Member offices” at the top of the page or “Contact your Representative” at the bottom. This will also help you identify your representative if you are in doubt.

To send an e-mail to your Senators, go to www.senate.gov and click on Senators. This will allow you to go to your Senators web site either alphabetically or by state, so it is easy to identify both your Senators.

You can also use the websites listed above to look up your Representative’s and Senators’ district office addresses and phone numbers, their biographies, and see their press releases and statements to get a better understanding of what they are working on in Congress.

SEND A FAX

To send a fax, see the “write a letter” section above. After you have written a letter, you can contact your Representative, Senators or the President via phone (see the “make a phone call” section above) or over the internet (see the “send an e-mail” section above) for their fax numbers. While not all members and senators list their fax numbers publicly, almost all will give them out to constituents if you call and ask for them.

