

MAKING AN IMPACT ON LEGISLATION

Creating Awareness

Legislators are elected by the people to represent the people. In order to do their job it is necessary that legislators gather input from those they represent. While you may personally question the position a legislator takes or the vote that they make, it is certain that they are attempting to serve their constituency. Repeatedly failing to serve that constituency will cause them to be voted out of office.

For some reason, many people dread contacting their legislators and flatly refuse to do so. This failure to communicate is a serious error, as the legislator must continue to take policy positions and cast votes based on the information they have available. It is virtually impossible for a legislator to read your mind and determine your wishes, so your input is appreciated and important.

The simple act of contacting a legislator should not be considered lobbying. The fact that you have entrusted an individual with the right to attend to your welfare when you went to the voting booth, gives you the right and responsibility to communicate your wishes to them in a republic-style governmental process. Use your rights, fulfill your responsibilities and communicate with your legislator on a regular basis.

In order to have the greatest opportunity for success in your communications, the following pages provide some helpful hints and strategies in how to deliver messages to elected officials.

Know Your Legislators

READ THEIR BIOGRAPHY – The biographies of elected officials may be obtained from their local office or from the Illinois General Assembly web page. The biography will provide valuable information on the legislator's educational background, military service, occupation, number of years in legislature, family, etc.

LOCATE PEOPLE YOU BOTH MAY KNOW – Common friends, relatives, neighbors and business contacts can provide a starting point for conversations and discussions with legislators.

BE AWARE OF THEIR SCHEDULE – This is important whether you are dealing with them in their home district or at the Capitol. Their time is controlled by committee meetings, required floor time, staff analysis, etc.

KNOW THEIR STAFF - Secretaries, research staff, and aides are gatekeepers that control access to the legislator and provide advice on key issues.

Know Your Be's

Good communication doesn't just happen. It is important to plan ahead by getting your thoughts in order and planning ahead for concerns or questions that might arise in a conversation. Remember communications is a combination of speaking and listening skills, so speak clearly and listen clearly. No matter who the elected official is and no matter what method you choose to use in communicating with them, you should be certain to follow your Be's.

BE Informed of all issues concerning vocational education (appropriations, policies, target groups, clientele) before talking to the legislators or their staff.

BE Knowledgeable, know your legislator's personal data and background information.

BE Practical and have a well thought out program of action you could recommend.

BE Brief, legislators are very busy people.

BE Understanding, if you try to understand your legislator's positions, you will go further.

BE Friendly by keep in touch all year, not just when you want something.

BE Constructive, remember you don't like to be scolded or preached to, neither do legislators.

BE Realistic, legislators have to compromise with each other.

BE Reasonable and recognize that there are legitimate differences of opinion.

BE Thoughtful by commending them when they do things right.

BE Charitable, and when you feel your legislators failed you, step back and evaluate whether you did a good job of informing them of the issues.

BE A Good Opponent by fighting on issues and being prepared with alternate solutions.

BE Consistent by sending information on a regular basis, not just when you want them to vote for something.

Communicating in Writing

Written communications to legislators can take several forms. While the most common written ways to communicate you or your organization's views to a legislator is by letter, there are other methods. Telegrams are still possible and due to their uniqueness may receive considerable attention upon arrival.

The types of telegrams are: 1) *Personal Opinion Messages* can be sent to *the* President, the Vice President, Congresspersons and Senators, and can contain up to 20 words and the message will be delivered the next day; 2) *Mailgrams* can contain up to 100 words and can be sent to anyone, not just public officials. They are delivered the day after message sent. 3) *Night letter* contain up to 15 words and can be sent at night and arrive next day at a reduced rate; and *Telegram* can contain 15 words and can be sent immediately. You may write to any legislator in the state, but you have more influence in the legislative district where you vote. A state legislator may read hundreds of letters each week and the following are recommendations for writing effective letters to legislators:

- Write legibly or type all letters. Keep your letter short and to the point.
- Write on your personal stationery or a business letterhead. If you are writing as a representative of a group, write on the organization's stationery. Always sign your full name and address so that your legislator can respond.
- If you are a constituent, begin your letter by saying so. If you supported or voted for the legislator, say that also. (If neither is true, say nothing on these subjects.)
- Do not begin on the righteous note of "As a citizen and a taxpayer. . ." "The legislator assumes that you are not an alien and knows that we all pay taxes.
- If you are working with others on the issue or if you are otherwise active in the community, say this also. Do not say you belong to a specific political or lobbying organization, since that may detract from the apparent spontaneity of your letter.
- Make your position clear and state exactly what it is you would like your legislator to do. Whenever possible, refer to a specific bill by name and/or number and not just to a general issue. Write about one bill or issue in each letter.
- Make the letter entirely your own. Express your thoughts and conclusions in your own words. Do not use stereotyped phrases and sentences from form letters. They will be recognized as "pressure mail" and will get dumped in wastebaskets.
- Your own personal experience is the best supporting evidence. Tell your legislator how the issue would affect you, your family, your schools, your community or the state.
- Be reasonable; do not seek impossible things. Do not threaten. Do not say, "I'll never vote for you if you don't do such and such." The legislator does not want a vote of that kind anyway.
- After you have told your legislator where you stand, request they state their position in a reply.
- If your legislator pleases you with a vote on an issue, write and tell them so. In fact, be appreciative of any positive votes in the past. Much of the mail received by legislators is from displeased constituents, so a letter complimenting them will be favorably remembered.
- Timing is important. If your letter arrives too early, it will be forgotten. If your legislator is a member of the committee to which your bill has been referred, write when the committee begins hearings. If your legislator is not a member of the committee handling the bill, write them just before the bill is to come to the floor for debate and vote.
- Do not write to the members of the House while a bill is still being considered in the Senate and vice versa. The bill may be quite changed by the time it leaves that other chamber.
- Write the Governor promptly after both houses pass the bill if you want to influence the decision whether or not to sign it into law.
- Do not send a photo or carbon copy to your other legislators when you have addressed a letter to one. Write to each legislator individually. Address your legislator properly by using their title and office.

The Honorable (name)

State Senator (or State Representative) (or Governor of Illinois)
State House
Springfield, Illinois 62706

Communicating by Telephone

While telephone calls are the quickest method they are unlikely to put you in direct communication with the legislator. During the year, the legislator's office in their home districts can provide services and information for you.

Call that office to find the immediate status of a bill, as well as to convey your opinions. If the legislature is in session and action on a bill is impending, you should call your legislators at their Springfield offices. The following are recommendations for making telephone calls to your legislators. If the legislature is in session, your legislator is probably at their desk on the floor of the chamber.

- Identify yourself by name, address and hometown within their legislative district.
- Identify the bill by name and number.
- Briefly state what your position is and how you would like your legislator to vote.
- Ask for your legislator's view on the bill or issue: be firm in obtaining a commitment to vote.
- Show appreciation for his/her service or past votes. Be positive.
- If your legislator requires further information, supply it as quickly as possible. The legislative cycle moves extremely fast during the session.
- Do not be abusive and do not threaten your legislator.
- Legislators can telephone you from the floor. If you would like to discuss the bill more fully with your legislator, ask the secretary or legislative aide to relay your name and telephone number to your legislator and ask that your call be returned. Even if you are not able to speak to your legislators directly, your messages will be relayed to them and can only add to the overall impact of your legislative effort.
- If you do not have a legislator's Springfield office telephone number, call the Capitol switchboard at (217) 782-2000 and ask them to connect you with the legislator's office. Or look up the legislator at the General Assembly website (www.ilga.gov)

Communicating by Personal Visit

One of the most effective ways to inform legislators is in face-to-face visits with them. Most legislators have offices within their districts and have regular office hours during which time they are available to their constituents. In addition to their district offices, legislators have offices in Springfield. However, because of the hectic legislative pace, it is more difficult to predict a legislator's availability when the legislature is in session. Nevertheless, if legislators know that their constituents have traveled to the Capitol, they will come off the floor of the legislature, leave a committee hearing or find some other way to meet with them. Remember: you have one Senator and one Representative in your legislative district and both should be contacted in order to maximize the impact of your visit. Here are some suggestions for maximizing the impact of your face-to-face communications:

- Call the legislator's home office and make an advance appointment. You should suggest a date and alternative time for the visit or activity and then be on time for the appointment. Legislative

visits can take place in the legislator's office or at other events such as: a school visit, breakfast meeting, banquet, reception, etc. If the legislator is visiting you or your school, ask if they would like media coverage.

- Identify who you are what your area of interest is, whom you represent and what you want. If you are a constituent, begin by telling them that they are your representative. If you have any family, social, business or political ties to your legislators, it may serve as identification when your point of view is considered.
- Let your legislators know if you are working with others on the issue, if you are active in the community, or if you are representing members of your organization.
- Do your homework and be prepared. A short written statement of your position should be presented to your legislators to explain what the bill does and why they should support your viewpoint. If amendments are being offered, have a mock-up of what the bill would look like with the amendments in it.
- Be brief, informal, friendly and to the point. Be clear about what your position is and what you would like your legislators to do. Identify your bill by name and number whenever possible.
- Be firm in discussing the issue with your legislators, but do not try to force them into changing their positions or committing themselves if they clearly do not want to do so.
- Always be courteous in dealing with your legislators, and never let your disagreement lead to a harsh or personal remark. If you lose your temper or prevent them from speaking, they will feel justified in branding you a kook" or a "crackpot" and will disregard everything you have said. Besides, it is important not to alienate them; you may need their support on other issues.
- It is usually best to visit your legislators in small groups—three people are optimum—and to keep your visits as brief as you can. Going alone may be unsatisfactory because legislators may try to outtalk you or you may reach an impasse too quickly. You should convey the impression that these three people are representatives of many more; if each of the three represents a different organization their potential voting power will maximize the impact of your visit.
- Summarize your major points of discussion before ending the meeting.
- To call your legislators off the floor of the chamber, go to the third floor of the Capitol. At the main entrance of the chamber, write a note explaining who you are and which bill you wish to discuss (e.g.: "Rep. Green — May I speak with you concerning HB 563? — (state your name and town). Your note will be delivered to the legislator by one of the doorkeepers, and the legislator will usually come out to meet you.
- When you return home, send the legislator a letter of thanks and remind them of any commitments agreed upon after the visit or activity.

The Ten Commandments of Legislative Awareness

- 1) Never lie or mislead a legislator about the relative importance of an issue, the opposition's position or strength, or any other matter.
- 2) Look for friends in unusual places. In politics, a friend is someone who works with you on a particular issue—whether a Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative—even if that person or group opposes you on every other issue.
- 3) Never cut off anybody from contact. Do not let a legislator consider you a bitter enemy because you disagree; today's opponent may be tomorrow's ally.
- 4) Do not grab credit. "Nothing is impossible if it does not matter who gets the credit."
- 5) Your word is your bond. Never promise anything you cannot deliver.
- 6) Do not waste time on opponents who are publicly committed to their position. It is more productive to shore up known allies and to work with legislators who are least committed or who claim to be neutral or keeping an open mind.
- 7) Never forget to notice and thank anyone who has helped you. The "good ole boy good ole girl" system is alive and well in Springfield.
- 8) Do not gossip. Knowing a legislator is one thing; talking about them is another. Remember that discretion is the better part of valor.
- 9) "When you are crossed politically, don't get mad. Get even." (Bobby Kennedy) The power of the ballot box is yours.
- 10) Carry a rabbit's foot. In legislative activities you can know your opponent: you can develop imaginative and reasonable compromises: you can burn the midnight oil to digest all the arguments: but it can all go right down the drain if you don't have a little luck.

Tips for Effective Advocacy

Former State Representative Bob Pritchard

Pre-Meeting

- Get to know your legislator, introduce yourself at an event, volunteer to help
- Clearly identify your issue, goal, what you want from the legislator?
- Why should the legislator be interested in your issue
- Prepare a short (one page) fact-sheet on the issue
- Prepare arguments both pro and con to your issue
- Prepare answers to the arguments against your position
- Research the legislator's position on this issue (prior votes, statements); focus on the persuadable or swing votes
- Is there a field trip or upcoming event that you could invite the legislator to that would help explain your issue?
- Identify a "thank you" or congratulations for something the legislator has done/ received
- Prepare questions to ask the legislator

Meeting

- Call to schedule a meeting
- Identify staff who deal with your issue; involve them
- Do you need to take others with you to add emphasis or details to your issue (limit 2-3)
- Plan you agenda, points each person will make
- Be on time
- Compliment the legislator for something; ask about something in which the legislator is interested
- Introduce your issue and ask what the legislator knows about it. Start where s/he is
- Tell why the legislator should be interested in your issue; have a conversation
- Do you have an anecdote to share, invitation to event?
- Share your fact sheet
- Ask if the legislator has questions; needs additional information; be a good listener
- If you don't know the answer, don't make up information; promise to get back to them
- Don't argue with the legislator or be confrontational
- Ask the legislator for some action (vote, sponsorship, research, a bill)
- Ask how the legislator wants communication with you (letter, e-mail, phone, text, in person)
- Be mindful of the time; don't stay too long

Post-Meeting

- Write your notes of the meeting, who attended, topics discussed, responses, action items
- Send a follow-up thank you note, e-mail, or letter
- Provide the additional information requested at the meeting
- Be a squeaky wheel; polite persistence
- Encourage others to contact the legislator
- Remember the power of voters, campaign endorsements, get-out-the-vote efforts

