

THE Arc

GUIDELINES FOR INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY MAKERS

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INTRODUCTION – WHY YOU?

Whether you think of yourself as a lobbyist, an advocate, a parent of a son or daughter with a disability, a concerned citizen or a human services professional who doesn't get involved with politics, if you care about children and adults with disabilities and have information about their conditions, you have a role in the political process. Decisions are being made somewhere about policies, programs, money, entitlements and eligibility, by people on local, state and national boards, commissions, councils, committees, as well as legislatures and Congress.

As a general rule, the decision makers, whether elected or appointed, are hard-working, dedicated to the job and take pride in their accomplishments. The next general rule is that they don't have the same commitment to the welfare of people with disabilities that you do, nor do they have specific information about how their decisions will affect the lives and welfare of this group of citizens.

Public policy makers represent you and serve you. To do that well, they must have information from you. Our system of government depends upon responsible citizen participation. These guidelines are presented to assist you to effectively provide that special interest perspective – by writing letters, making telephone calls, visiting policy makers and working as part of a network. References are made to State legislators; however, the same actions would apply to school board members, county commissioners, city council members, social service commissioners, etc.

PREPARING YOURSELF

You belong to an association that has adopted policies and positions on specific issues that determine your "cause". Develop a method of presenting your message (pro or con) that will capture the interest of the legislature. Stick to the facts, but package them in a slogan, a phrase, a brochure or fact sheet that will hold the attention of the legislator.

Believe in your message. You will reflect your commitment, enthusiasm and dedication. Elected officials enjoy meeting constituents and appreciate politeness, a sense of humor and truthfulness.

Statistics are important, but people respond to people. The example of one real person can be more powerful than statistics about hundreds and will be remembered longer.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR LEGISLATORS

With the variety and number (500-1,000) of bills introduced in each legislative session, your legislators cannot possibly understand every issue and every bill. They must depend on others to interpret legislation for them. To make your “cause” of interest to your legislator you will have to know their point of view, the impact on his/her district. To achieve name or face recognition, you will have to make regular, reliable contacts and start early. Don’t wait for a crisis.

The following checklist are ideas and tactics that will provide information to your legislators about your cause and identify you as a respected advisor.

- Invite each of your legislators to speak to your group on an issue.
- Invite each of your legislators to tour a program.
- Present an award to your legislators for some service.
- Visit each of your legislators when they are “at home” – not in session.
- Attend public meetings and address questions to your legislators.
- Write to each of your legislators.
- Urge friends and associates to join you in any or all of these steps.

PERSONAL VISITS

One of the most effective ways to influence the decision of a legislator is in a face to face visit. Frequent contacts are necessary to associate your face and name with your “cause”. Whether you plan to meet one-to-one or with a group, plan the meeting and list your goals in priority order. Pick one or two issues to discuss. If it’s a first time meeting, select issues to which you think he/she will be sympathetic – or at least about which he/she will be open minded. Use a team approach A group of no more than three or four adds to your visit any more and the legislator might make a speech.

Here are some steps to follow:

- Make an appointment. If you drop by without an appointment, you may miss the legislator, you may wait, you may force him/her to postpone something else, thereby creating negative feelings before you begin.
- Always introduce yourself, even at a second or third meeting. Don’t put the legislator in the awkward position of having to ask your name.

- Get down to business quickly. Begin on a positive note. Thank him/her for previous support on an issue or for taking time from a busy schedule to see you.
- Be clear. Be brief. Be simple. State your position and what you'd like your legislator to do.
- Identify a bill by name and number.
- Be specific about how the issue impacts his/her constituency.
- Plan ahead, decide who will say what.
- Express your concerns. Offer solutions. Don't try to force legislators into changing a position or committing themselves if it is obvious they do not want to do so. (If you lose your temper or prevent them from speaking, they may feel justified in disregarding everything you have said.)
- Leave written materials about your issue.
- If your legislator is supportive, ask what you can do to help work on the issue.

LETTERS

Letters count. Your letter is permanent record of your position. In a letter writing campaign ten, twenty or fifty letters can be perceived as a groundswell of support. Timing is important; your association will alert you. If you write too soon you may not capture the attention of the legislator, and if you write too late, the decision may have already been made. Most legislators are conscientious about their mail and consider the views of the constituents when they deliberate an issue.

HOW TO WRITE

- Write your own letter. Use your own words to express your thoughts. Do not use post cards.
- State your reason for writing. Explain how the issue effects you. Request action.
- Refer to any research or data on the issue.
- If you are urging action (support or opposition) on a bill, give the bill's number, author and subject.
- Use personal or business letterhead, if possible. Typed letters are usually easier to read, but handwritten letters are acceptable if they are legible.
- Put your return address in your letter. Envelopes may be thrown away.
- Be reasonable, specific and positive. Don't engage in threats or ask the impossible.

- Ask your legislator to state his/her position on the issue in a written reply.
- Thank your legislator for the time and attention, for the support, for the vote.
- Write again. When you establish a record of correspondence you will develop clout on future issues.
- Send copies of your letters and replies to your local and/or state Arc.

TELEPHONE CALLS & EMAIL MESSAGES:

Telephone calls and emails do not substitute for face-to-face visits. They can be used if rapport has already been established with the legislator or if an issue is contested and you are part of a group trying to convey broad community support for a position. Identify yourself by name and hometown. Identify the issue and state your position as concisely as possible. Briefly state the action you'd like the legislator to take. If the legislator has been supportive in the past – thank him/her.

MORE ABOUT THANK YOU'S

Always write to thank the legislator for meeting with you, talking with you, voting as you hoped or for doing anything else in your interest.

A WORD ABOUT STAFF

Legislative staff assistants or interns, when they exist, are often relied upon by legislators to do research and suggest opinions on certain subjects. Never underestimate the influence of a staff person if you have the opportunity to talk with them. Present your views with the same respect and courtesy you would show to the legislator.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Newspapers reach thousands of people who otherwise might not be aware of an issue of concern to you. A letter to the editor may inspire readers to write in support of your “cause”. It could also prompt an editorial. The key to having letters printed is keeping them short, accurate and to the point.

TO GET YOUR LETTERS PUBLISHED

- Keep your letter within the average length of letters that are published.
- Write on a topic that is currently in the news.
- Be concise. Avoid rambling.
- Appeal to the audience. Show how your issue solves an important problem of public concern.
- Sign your name and give your address. (Your address will not be printed.)

JOINING FORCES WITH OTHERS

By participating in a coordinated legislative action network, you can effectively create the picture that “the grass roots” support the issue. A half-dozen letters from a variety of respected organizations will add to the impression of the “worthiness” of the cause. If a legislator hears the same information from several sources, then reads about it and also hears a staff person or colleague talk about it, the information is considered reliable.

Effective advocacy means getting others to talk for you so the message is repeated over and over. The most “repeatable” messages are those that can be remembered. A story that has a point and creates a strong image cannot be easily shaken by the hearer.

Urge local newspapers, radio and television stations to give editorial support to your positions. The ripple effect can build to a wave of public support that will guarantee legislative support of your cause.

These are other ways to increase public awareness and pressure:

Media: Use the media to organize others. Write press releases and/or organize press conferences on important events.

Talk shows: Approach talk show hosts about your issue, or call in to talk to guests on shows.

Speaking Campaigns: Organize a speaking campaign and provide speakers at meetings of local clubs and organizations.

Coalitions: Multiply your impact on an issue by organizing other groups to support your issue. They can help you by writing, by accompanying you, and by utilizing their network to bring attention to your issue. It is understood you will help them at some future time where there is a mutual interest.

REMINDER DO’S AND DON’TS

If you’ve read this far, you are serious, you have already decided on a political stand and you want to win!

DO - Consider your efforts to influence policymakers as a business and be businesslike.

DON’T - Consider all politicians evil and crass and yourself as righteous and noble.

DO - Make it an advantage to a legislator to vote “your way”.

DO - Play detective. Learn the interests of particular legislators, past businesses, associates, club memberships, college, hobbies and pastime.

DO - Remember your role is to get results – not credit.

DO - Treat your legislator as an intelligent citizen and a friend to your “cause”.

- DON'T - Try to present your total message when your legislator is obviously busy or in a hurry.
- DO - Perfect the "quick hit". Practice your message so you can present the basics in one to three minutes. "Senator, I'm _____ and I'd like to talk to you about SB10. You'll be voting on it in Committee this afternoon. We are here from your district because this bill will be critical to ____ number of children and adults because _____. We would appreciate your yes vote."
- DO - Play to stereotypes. Make it appear that all walks of life support your issue – academicians, professionals, business communities, religious groups, ethnic minorities, white middle class, young artists, retired seniors.
- DO - Provide personal stories that will be remembered by the legislator.
- DO - Provide a written summary of your position.
- DON'T - Threaten a legislator with votes.
- DO - Write a thank you following every visit or supportive action by your legislator.

CORRECT ADDRESS

For State Senators:
 The Honorable _____
 Colorado State Senate
 State Capitol
 Denver, CO 80203

For State Assemblymen:
 The Honorable _____
 Colorado State House of Representatives
 State Capitol Bldg.
 Denver, CO 80203

Dear Senator _____:

Dear Representative _____:

For the Governor:

For Members of the Supreme Court:

Honorable _____
 Governor
 State Capitol Bldg.
 Denver, CO 80203

Honorable _____
 Chief Justice
 _____ Supreme Court

or

Dear Governor _____:

Honorable _____
 Associate Justice
 _____ Supreme Court

Dear Justice _____:

Mayor: The Honorable _____
Mayor,
_____, Colorado

Dear Mayor:

U. S. Senator: The Honorable _____
United State Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator _____:

Councilman: Councilman (woman) _____
Council Chambers
City Hall
_____, Colorado

U.S. Representative:
The Honorable _____
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

President: President _____
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. _____:

Dear Mr. President:

Very Respectfully yours,