

# Strategies for Effective Communication with Legislators – *The Basics*

*(Tips are courtesy of the National Mental Health Association)*

## Essentials for Communicating with Legislators:

- ➤ **Keep it Local:** The local constituency is the most important to the state legislator. State legislative offices pay more attention to personal communications from constituents than any other source.
- ➤ **Keep it Personal:** Personal forms of communication, such as letters, telephone calls, or office visits, indicate a greater amount of effort. The more obvious the effort, the more seriously the communication is taken.
- ➤ **Keep it Concise:** Given the busy nature of legislative offices, the more concise the communication, the more likely it is to receive attention.
- ➤ **Put it in Writing:** A written communication provides a readily available record in the office that can be used whenever a staff member or legislator addresses the issue. When you have a meeting or speak with a legislator or staff on the phone, follow up with a letter briefly summarizing your discussion and reiterating your position.

## Making the Most with a Visit to your Legislator:

It is important to remember that you are the expert on the subject at hand – you have the information that the legislator needs. At the same time you do not need to be a policy expert, but you do need to be well prepared. Legislators like numbers, particularly financial ones. In the case of mental health, data (costs, utilization, epidemiological statistics, etc.) are not always available, but should be used whenever possible. An example would be ...

- Epidemiological statistics within your state to demonstrate how many people are likely to access a new mental health service you want your state to develop.

We suggest preparing a “fact sheet” for your visit. **For a sample “[fact sheet](#)” click here**

### *A. Visiting your Legislator at his or her District Office*

Many state legislators spend quite a bit of time in their district offices. District offices are often less hectic so the legislator may be able to give you more time and attention.

Following these tips will add to the effectiveness of your visit

- **Make an appointment** – It is better to telephone than to write for the appointment because calling makes it easier to find an acceptable date and harder for a staff member to turn you down.

- ***Do not turn down the opportunity to meet with a staffer*** – Some staff members wield considerable power and often are able to give more time and attention to issues than legislators can.
- ***During the visit, seek advice on how organization/coalition can be the most helpful in developing support for your legislation*** – Legislators, especially those taking the lead on your bill, will often have a number of ideas and suggestions to help you focus your efforts.
- ***Present your issue from the legislator’s perspective, tying it in with his or her past votes or interests*** – It is important to listen attentively. Often, the legislator’s opening discussions with you will give you clues about how to connect your issues with his or her concerns.
- ***Legislators will particularly appreciate any anecdotes or illustrations that demonstrate the impact your legislation will have on people in their districts*** – Always remember that you often know much more about your issue than legislators and that they truly welcome any relevant information that you can provide.
- ***Give responses to arguments that you know your opposition will raise*** – never speak ill of them personally.
- ***If you do not have an answer to a legislator’s question, say so. Never bluff*** – Tell the legislator that you will provide the information at a later date, and then be sure that you do.
- ***It is important to provide information both orally and in a “fact sheet”***- Be certain that the fact sheet includes the following information: (1) a brief description of your issues; (2) why it is important to your organization or coalition; and (3) the action you want the legislator to take. Make sure that you give a copy of the fact sheet to the legislator’s staff as well. The staff member may be your principal contact in the future, so be sure to strengthen that contact during the visit.
- ***After the visit, write a letter of thanks to the legislator*** – Remind him or her of any agreements reached, and provide any information that you promised. This is very important for building an on-going relationship.

### ***B. Writing an Effective Letter to Legislators:***

Even the day of email, the letter is still the most effective way to communicate your needs and viewpoints to legislators. The letter represents more effort than an email and letters can also be faxed, therefore they can reach the legislator’s office just as timely as an email. We recommend if you are representing an organization/coalition, letters should be printed on letterhead and sent via fax if urgent.

Ideally, letters should be personal and appear spontaneous, not canned. They should include personal anecdotes that are relevant and concise. It is also very important that the facts contained in the letter are accurate. Below are some key ingredients for writing an effective letter.

- ***If you the legislator, make that clear in the first paragraph.*** This will alert the mail opener that this is a letter that deserves special attention.
- ***Note if you live in a legislator's district.*** If you do not, note that you are part of an organization/coalition that represents constituents that do.
- ***Handwritten letters are perfectly acceptable, if they are readable.*** In fact, they can receive more attention than typed letters in some cases.
- ***If possible, keep your letter to one page.*** It is important to write in your own words, to avoid bold words or jargon, and to use only the acronyms that you are certain your legislator will know.
- ***Cover only one issue per letter.*** Letters that address multiple issues are much less effective. In the first paragraph, ask for the action you want your legislator to take. Identify the legislation clearly, with the bill number of the legislation if it is known.
- ***Send additional materials if you think more information is needed.*** For example, relevant editorials and news stories from local papers in the legislator's district will get her or his attention.
- ***Ask legislators to reply, and ask very directly whether he or she will support your position.*** Legislators are known for writing letters that avoid giving you their potions.