

Legislative Advocacy

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Communicating with lawmakers

Seeking the advice and support of policymakers and elected officials is an important part of advocating for children. The best way to do this is establishing relationships, a cornerstone for effective advocacy.

Here are some guidelines for communicating effectively with legislators:

- Your word is your bond. Do not ever promise something you cannot deliver. Credibility is what you bring to a relationship with any public official.
- Talk in terms they understand. Avoid acronyms, abbreviations, or “buzz words” that are not easily understood by someone unfamiliar with your issue.
- Organize your presentation. Prepare an outline of your talking points in advance. Focus directly on the issues you want to cover. Be brief and to the point. Legislators are busy and appreciate concise, well-organized discussions.
- Position papers should be short and concise. If at all possible, cover your issue in one page. Short bullets or paragraphs are effective. Also, using a different color paper helps identify you or your organization with your issue. Always have your name, address and telephone number on any position paper so they can follow up.
- Be informed. Never promote a position without first studying the facts and the arguments on both sides.
- Do not underestimate elected officials and policymakers. With rare exceptions, they are honest, intelligent, hard working, and want to do the right thing. Your job is to inform them about your issue and position.
- Treat them as you would like to be treated. Put yourself in their shoes. Try to understand their outlook and goals. This will help you better communicate your point.
- Be helpful. Do not let your first contact be when you want something. Invite lawmakers to be guests at meetings. Keep in touch with them throughout the year.

Never Too Early

Don't wait to get involved with your legislators.

During the campaign season:

- Meet candidates and ask questions about your issues.
- Assist candidates in developing a campaign platform
- Volunteer to stuff envelopes, make telephone calls and give rides to polls.

Once they are elected:

- Schedule a meeting to review the legislator's goals for the next session.
- Develop a relationship with his/her legislative assistant.
- Become a source for accurate information about your issue

Get to know your legislator

As a citizen, you are free to get to know and communicate with your legislators. Although Florida law requires that you must be a registered lobbyist in order to attempt to influence legislation, there are no prohibitions against providing information.

Here are some guidelines for getting to know your legislator:

- Call their offices and speak to their legislative assistants. What were their major issues and legislation this past session? On which committees do they serve? Even if they do not serve on committees affecting your issue, they respond to constituent requests on a variety of issues. Ask about town meetings, legislative caucus meetings or other forums during which the legislators will develop their platforms. Offer your assistance and input.
- Invite your local legislator to any open house, groundbreaking ceremony, celebration, or public meeting. Ask them to address your organization or group. If the legislator cannot attend, invite his/her legislative assistant.
- Include your local legislator on your mailing list. Send legislators your newsletter or other material about your issue.
- Clip newspaper and magazine articles that address your issue. Legislators and legislative assistants are always looking for new information to use in speeches and other appearances.
- Send them a fact sheet on your program or issue. Offer your assistance on any requests for information or complaints they have received about your issue.

- If legislators are unable to visit your program, schedule an appointment to meet with them at their district offices. Prepare a brochure or short fact sheet to leave behind. Invite them to visit your program or facility. Always send a thank you note.
- Legislative delegations schedule delegation meetings throughout the year. Find out when these will be and try to get on the agenda. Do not use this forum only as a means of complaining. Use it as an opportunity to educate them about your issue and the benefits your program or organization brings to the community. Establish an ongoing relationship with legislative assistants. Provide them with information about your services, programs or facilities. Become a resource.

Understand your legislator's viewpoint

"All politics is local." This quote by former Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives Tip O'Neil means that legislators pay first allegiance to their districts and to their reelection. Effective grassroots contact is critical.

Your legislator wants to do the right thing. Each of us wants to do a good job, even elected officials.

Your legislator wants to get reelected. Most legislators are constantly concerned with what they have to do to keep their position or move ahead.

Your legislator wants to be responsive. Legislators are in the business of pleasing people and want to accommodate you - but not at any cost. Other considerations may prevent him/her from doing so.

Your legislator may know nothing about your issue. Unless your legislator is a member of a committee having jurisdiction over your issue, he/she may know little or nothing about it. Educating your legislator is imperative.

Your legislator is beset by conflicting pressures. Reduce taxes, but don't cut spending. Cut spending, but not our program. Tax the other guy, but not me and so on. You can provide key information on why your issue or program is necessary and cost effective.

Your legislator wants to know how legislation affects the local district. How does a bill impact local constituencies, good or bad?

Your legislator finds it hard to vote against a friend but easy to vote against someone he/she doesn't know. Votes in the legislature are often about taking money from one program or service and giving it to another. Unless your legislator knows the impact that your issue has on his/her district, it is easy to accept the argument that a cut can be made.

Understanding the political process

An understanding of the structure is critically important for working with legislators. There are three major branches of government: the legislative branch, the executive branch and the judicial branch. Each plays a particular role in the political process and in ensuring the health, safety and welfare of Florida's citizens.

Legislative Branch—The Legislative Branch establishes laws and determines general policies of the state. It consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Regular legislative sessions have a maximum life of 60 consecutive days.

This may be extended, however, by a three-fifths vote of each house.

A break-down of the Florida legislative branch includes:

- The House of Representatives
Members: 120
Term of Office: Two years
Term Limit: Eight years
Presiding Officer: Speaker of the House

- The Senate
Members: 40
Term of Office: Four years
Term Limit: Eight years
Presiding Officer: President of the Senate

Executive Branch—The Executive Branch administers the laws and makes policy recommendations to the Legislature. In 2001, it consists of seven state agencies with the heads of the agencies serving as the Florida Cabinet. In 2002, the Department of Education will no longer serve as a Cabinet Agency. A breakdown of the Florida Cabinet and term restrictions include:

- Governor, limited to two consecutive four-year terms
- Secretary of State, unlimited four-year terms
- Attorney General, unlimited four-year terms
- Comptroller, unlimited four-year terms
- Treasurer, unlimited four-year terms
- Commissioner of Agriculture, unlimited four-year terms
- Commissioner of Education, unlimited four-year terms

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Information

Information relating to the legislature is public information and much of it is available free of charge.

Online Sunshine

House and Senate calendars, Florida Statutes, bill history, bill text, and information about your legislators, lobbyists and the legislature are accessible on the internet at www.leg.state.fl.us.

Telephone numbers

- Legislative Information (850) 488-4371
- Lobbyist Registration (850) 922-4990
- House Documents (850) 488-7475
- Senate Bill Room (850) 487-5312

Judicial Branch—The Judicial Branch interprets the laws and applies the Constitution. It consists of the Supreme Court, the five district Courts of Appeals, 20 circuit courts and 67 county courts.

- Supreme Court, seven justices, highest court in the state
- District Court of Appeals, five districts, hears appeals from Circuit Court
- Circuit Court, 20 circuits, hears civil and criminal cases requiring a jury
- County Court, 67 courts, generally handles non-jury trials

How an idea becomes law

- Either house may originate any type of legislation. The processes differ slightly between houses.
- A legislator sponsors a bill, which is referred to one or more committees related to the bill's subject.
- The committee studies the bill and decides if it should be amended, passed, or failed.
- If passed, the bill moves to other committees of reference or to the full house.
- The full house votes on the bill. If it passes in one house, it is sent to the other house for review.
- A bill goes through the same process in the second house as it did in the first.
- A bill can go back and forth between houses until a consensus is reached. Of course, the measure could fail at any point in the process.

Communicating with your legislator

Your legislators need and want to hear from you, in order to better

ACTION AGENDA

Influencing the legislative process

- The legislative process has its own language and way of doing things. If you have just a rudimentary understanding of the process, your effectiveness will increase greatly.
- Obtain the latest calendar indicating legislative dates for interim committee meetings, bill filing deadlines, and regular sessions. These are available on-line at the Online Sunshine website, www.leg.state.fl.us.
- Learn how to read a House or Senate bill. Understand the difference between a committee Substitute and a Proposed Committee Bill.
- Get on a committee mailing list and develop a relationship with legislative committee staff members. Become a resource to them.
- Begin to understand the state appropriations process. This is an exceedingly complex process primarily because it is a yearlong process, but final decisions are made rapidly. It is very difficult to have an impact on this process, but in a time of limited resources, effective impact is critical.
- Know how to obtain accurate and up-to-date information on issues of importance to you. This will help you be effective, and your legislator will appreciate your efforts to remain informed.
- Your local legislator will be able to provide you with information if you cannot access the internet and the Online Sunshine website.

represent you, their constituents. You do not have to be an expert to write or send an email; your interest and concern is what counts. Keep in mind that if you do not write, your legislator will only hear from individuals opposed to your position. They do not hesitate to write.

Here are some tips for effective communication:

Identify yourself—Indicate if you are writing on your own behalf or as a member of an organization. Make it clear that the letter is from a constituent. Remind the legislator about any previous visits or communication, if related to the issue about which you are writing. Include your name and address on the letter/email and type or write legibly so they can quickly read your letter.

Identify your subject—State the name of the issue, program or legislation about which you are writing/emailing in the first paragraph. Include the bill number and accurate status, if known. Be friendly and give as much praise as possible. If the legislator provides you with helpful information or services, or if she or he votes as you asked her/him to, give them thanks and a “keep up the good work.” This also reminds them you are watching what they do. Be as specific as possible, referring to a bill by name or number if possible. Show your familiarity with the subject and its current status.

State your position—Explain how a specific decision would affect you, your family, your program/facility, your employment, your local community, the legislator’s district, or the state. Write the letter/email without copying verbatim from a form letter. Explain your position by focusing on

two or three key points.

Be reasonable—Ask for the legislator’s support or opposition. Do not ask for the impossible. Do not use threats. Do be firm, confident, and positive.

Keep it short—Make it a page or less and quickly get to what you want. Include or attach newspaper articles or other material to support your points.

Cover only one subject in each letter—Different staff members in the legislator’s office cover different issues, so the message may not get to everyone you need. Write several letters if you want to cover more points.

Ask for a reply—Indicate to your legislator that you would appreciate a reply containing his/her position on the issue. As a constituent, you have a right to know your legislator’s views.

Follow-up—If your legislator’s position or vote on a bill pleases you, express your thanks. Everybody appreciates a complimentary letter. Also, you may want to express your dissatisfaction with votes that do not support your position. However, thank your legislator for his/her attention to your issue, regardless of the outcome of the vote.

Stationery—Write on personal stationery or on plain paper if your employment letterhead is not appropriate. Remember to put your return address on the letter, not just the envelope. Envelopes are often thrown away before a letter is answered.

Copies—Send a copy of your letter to your organization’s governmental affairs director or lobbyist if this is appropriate. If writing to a committee chairperson that is not your legislator, send a copy of the letter to him/her.

Do not use form letters—Make it as personal as possible and state how the issues relate to you.

A special power

Petitions, letter writing, demonstrations, and other kinds of advocacy are all important. The special power of the telephone and the Internet is in responding quickly to national initiatives before votes are taken.

Suggested salutations—

The Honorable Jane Smith

Address

City, State, Zip

Dear Senator Smith:

or

Dear Representative Smith:

E-mail is an effective way of communicating with legislators. The writing tips presented here apply to e-mails also.

Advocacy over the phone

The information on Advocacy over the phone was developed by Helen Blank of the Children's Defense Fund. While it specifically references contacts to federal officials, the same information is useful when communicating with your state or local officials.

Having an administration that supports children's issues means positive change is sure to come, right? Only if it hears from you!

A Possible Scenario—The President of the United States has just announced a bold initiative for children: access to high-quality care for every child, and additional resources to bolster elementary schools. The next morning the White House phones begin to ring. Is it the ground swell of support the President expected? On the contrary, most callers argue that money for childcare and early education is not a top priority. The President is surprised. Weren't these important issues to families? When the final tally is taken, calls against the proposals far outnumber those that support it. He begins to reconsider whether America really wants increased investment in children.

Could this happen? Indeed it could.

Many people who care about children assume that policy-makers support investing in children, or that if they don't, their minds cannot be changed. Either way, child-care providers, teachers, and parents do not usually call the White House to express their opinions about proposed initiatives, or to ask their Congressional representatives to support a particular bill. Yet a simple phone call can make a big difference.

A success story—In 1990, Congress enacted comprehensive childcare legislation. This victory for children did not come easily. For three years, child-care providers and other concerned citizens kept pressure on legislators in many ways: by writing letters to the editors of newspapers, by raising the issue at town meetings, and by distributing postcards to senators and representatives. At several critical points, they tied up the telephone lines of the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader. Through their actions, citizens made it clear to Congress and the White House that it would not be acceptable to adjourn in 1990 without first enacting this child care legislation into law. The Child Care and Development Block Grant is the result. Important as it is, it is only a beginning.

Success may be a phone call away. If our nation is to ensure strong policies for all children, we must make sure our elected officials know that this is important to us. The telephone is a fast, easy, and efficient way to help shape national policy for children. Here are some points to remember:

When calling the White House

- Telephone number—(202) 456-1111
- Best time to call— after the President makes a speech proposing a significant new childcare initiative.

ACTION AGENDA

Calling your legislator

- Identify yourself by name and state that you are a constituent.
- Explain why you are calling: “I am calling to support/oppose _____.”
- Provide supporting information by focusing on two or three talking points explaining your position. Do not argue; just express your views.
- Ask the legislator’s position.
- If the legislator’s position is the same as yours, express your agreement and thanks.
- If your position differs from the legislator’s, politely express disappointment and offer some factual information supporting your views.
- Request a written response. Restate your name and provide your mailing address.
- Thank the legislator or person taking the call for his/her time and consideration.
- If appropriate, follow-up with a letter.
- Remember these three rules when calling your legislator’s office:
 - 1) Give your full name and address.
 - 2) Be polite.
 - 3) Keep your call concise.

- To register your support—refer to the issue you’ve heard the President propose. For example, mention “the child care initiative,” or “full funding for Head Start.”

Helen Blank is a senior child-care associate at the Children’s Defense Fund. She works for improved early childhood policies at the federal, state, and local levels.

When calling Congress

- Telephone number—(202) 224-3121 This is a general number for Congress. Ask for the number of your Senator or Member of the House, and then ask for the person responsible for childcare.
- Best time to call—when child-care legislation is being brought to floor for a vote.
- To register your support—refer to the initiative proposed by the President. If legislation has already been introduced, reference the particular House or Senate bill. Mention that you work for children, and explain in a few short sentences why you think the measure is good for children.

More telephone tips

While the Florida Legislature is in session, you may want to or you may be asked to telephone your legislator to advocate a position on major legislation. Here are some tips for calling your legislator:

- When the Legislature is in session, it is most effective to call the Capitol or Tallahassee office of your legislator. When they are not in session, legislators are available through the district office.
- Ask to speak to the legislator. On many occasions, time does not permit legislators to receive or return telephone calls. Do not be offended. Be prepared to speak to

his/her legislative assistant who is very knowledgeable. Assistants are usually courteous and interested in what you have to say.

Remember to follow up!

After a visit, send a brief letter of thanks, referring to the most significant points covered in the conversation. Be sure to include any materials or information you said you would send after the visit. If you believe that your legislator could be more supportive if he/she heard from more constituents, channel your energy into mobilizing them.

Tips on visiting

One of the best ways to communicate with your legislators is to visit them, either in their district office or in Tallahassee. This lets legislators know you are serious and watching what they are doing.

Get an Appointment—Call the district office to see when the legislator will be in town and able to meet with you. Sometimes seeing the staff person is more profitable than meeting with the legislator.

If you feel you are being put off, have several people call for an appointment. Hopefully someone will be successful and you can form a delegation. If you cannot see the legislator, ask to see his or her aide. Legislative

aides have the ears of their bosses and can be very helpful.

Put Together a Delegation—The purpose of a delegation is to convey to the legislator that there is a broad base of community support for your issue in their constituency.

Two to four person delegations are fine. If you identify 12 people who are prepared to visit your legislator, arrange three separate visits of four people each, rather than one large visit.

It is helpful to plan your delegation. Have a person who knows the statistics, etc. and someone who has a personal story of how the legislation affects them.

Have a Plan—Plan your visit, who is going to say what and when. Be prepared to meet with an aide, in case the legislator had a last minute change. Again, know your opposition's argument, in case you are asked, and have a response for those arguments.

ACTION AGENDA

Meeting with your legislator

- Introduce yourself, even at a second or third meeting. Thank him or her for taking the time to meet with you and for any previous support.
- Get down to business quickly. Begin on a positive note and explain the issue that concerns you.
- Present the facts and background information you have gathered, along with the bill number, title, and author, if known.
- State your position, relating it to real people. Use personal stories or anecdotes.
- State what you want the legislator or staff person to do. Your job is to persuade the legislator and a personal story will leave an image they will remember.
- If asked something you are unable to answer, promise to get back with them (and make sure you do!)
- Ask what you can do, whether it is to provide additional information, arrange a tour of a program, or contact others.
- Have a short fact sheet summarizing your major points to leave with the legislator
- Above all, be punctual, courteous, friendly, and listen carefully.