

Effective Communication with Legislators



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Rules for effective advocacy

Even if you've never talked or written to a legislator before, you probably already have all the skills you need to advocate effectively for yourself and the counseling profession. Add a little bit of knowledge, and you're ready to go.

The basic principles are simple:

- **Be polite.** Would you respond favorably to an unsolicited letter or e-mail that was angry or insulting?
- **Be specific about what you want your legislator to do.** Do NOT ask your legislator to adopt a certain position; instead, ask your legislator to take a specific action. Your legislator won't be able to help you--and more importantly, you won't be able to tell whether the legislator has done what you've requested--unless you ask for concrete action.
- **Keep your communication brief, and focused on one issue.** Legislators simply don't have the time to read long, detailed letters or e-mails, and if your letter/e-mail talks about more than one issue, you're muddying the water. Visits should be completed in 15 minutes, phone calls in 5, letters should be no longer than a page or a page and a half, and e-mails should fit on one screen.
- **Build and preserve your credibility.** There's every chance you'll want to communicate with your legislator again--perhaps when he or she is in an even higher office! Once you lose your credibility, you'll be less likely to gain the legislator's ear in the future.
- **Don't write or type anything you wouldn't be comfortable with others--including potential opponents of your position--seeing and distributing.**
- **Always include your postal address, regardless of your form of contact.** If you don't, your legislator won't know you're a constituent.
- **Be persistent, and follow up.** It is highly likely that you A) won't get a response back initially from your legislator, B) won't get a response specifically focused on your request, or C) both A and B. This is why follow-up is so important. With the advent of the electronic age, legislators are typically swamped with constituent contacts. This is why contacting them again--while staying focused on your one, targeted, request and issue--is so important. Someone who takes the time to follow up will get more attention than someone who sends a single e-mail and then forgets about it.
- **Be persistent, and follow up.** No, this isn't a typo, just a reminder. Odds are that you WILL need to call or write at least one more time.

What makes policymakers tick?

Policy makers have some common characteristics that make the outcome of advocacy efforts more predictable. Knowing these characteristics, and knowing how to take advantage of them, can improve your chances for success.

- Policy makers hold public office to help others.
- Policy makers do not know everything, but are usually good learners.
- Policy makers have an incredible array of demands on their time, and don't have sufficient resources to meet all of these demands.
- Policy makers need to be asked (see previous bullet point).
- Policy makers are always running for office.
- Policy makers respond to crises.
- Policy makers behave differently when they know they're being watched.
- Policy makers like to be thanked.
- Policy makers love good press!

Two basic requirements before picking up the phone (or pen, or keyboard)...

While there are several ways to get in touch with policy makers, two basic requirements should be met regardless of the form of communication you use:

- 1 Know what the situation is.** Your call or e-mail will not be effective if the action you're asking the legislator to take isn't possible: how can she vote for your bill if it was already approved by her committee a month ago? Aside from wasting an opportunity to ask for something doable, a lack of knowledge about what's happening with a particular bill or regulation sends the signal to the legislator or bureaucrat that you don't care that much.
- 2 Know what your legislator's position is, if any.** As with point number 1, not knowing your legislator has already cosponsored the bill you're asking her to cosponsor shows you're not paying attention. And if you're not paying attention, why should your legislator? Your legislator may not have acted yet, but they may have, and if you're really that concerned about the issue you should find out.

Personal visits

A personal visit with a state legislator or a member of Congress is the most effective form of communication, as it's the most likely to give the legislator (or his staff) a human face to associate with your issue. Visits with state legislators can occur either in the state capitol or in their local office; a visit with a member of Congress can be scheduled in Washington, D.C., or at one of his or her district offices. Local visits are often easier to schedule, less rushed, and give you more "quality time" with a legislator or staff member. Legislators may also have "office hours" on weekends.

Some tips for planning a meeting with your legislator:

- Learn about the legislator, and what positions he or she is taking on the issue, if any. This is step 1 for a reason; you may find out that a meeting isn't that urgent--or that a meeting needs to happen ASAP!
- Make an appointment, and explain the issue you want to talk about. Be prepared to be flexible on when the visit occurs, as legislators and their staffs are very, very busy. If anyone else will be joining you, let the scheduler know.
- Don't be put off or insulted if you are offered an opportunity to meet with staff instead of the legislator. Legislators delegate many, if not most, of their meetings with constituents to staff. This does not mean that your legislator will be unreceptive to your views or that your message will not be heard. Staff members do report back to their bosses about meetings with constituents, and are often very influential in their own right.
- Prepare and/or collect supporting materials to accompany your presentation. Keep handouts to a minimum, though, and keep them short--one or two pages each, if possible. Bring business cards.
- If others are going, decide in advance who will say what.
- Practice your presentation. You should be able to convey the major points you want to hit--and make the specific action request--in fifteen minutes.

Some tips for conducting a meeting with your legislator:

- Be on time. Don't be surprised if you have to wait since there may have been unavoidable delays or changes in the legislator's/staffer's schedule. This is especially likely in the midst of a legislative session.
- When you arrive, introduce yourself to the receptionist. If you have a calling or business card, give one to the receptionist.

- When you meet the legislator (or staff person), introduce yourself and identify the group you are representing.
- State the reason for your visit concisely and accurately. Limit the number of issues you discuss and refer to bills by name and number.
- If your legislator has already publicly supported your position, express your thanks and tell him or her how much his or her efforts are appreciated. If your legislator has not yet committed to your position, clearly state reasons for supporting your position, and let him or her know you would appreciate his or her support. If your legislator is not supportive of your position, give him or her the information and politely ask him or her to reconsider the issue.
- Be prepared to answer questions, but don't be afraid to say "I don't know, let me get back to you on that" if you get asked a question you don't know the answer to. Do NOT make stuff up! Your credibility is a vital resource.
- Leave fact sheets or supporting materials with the legislator, along with your business card. Include a contact name and number on the materials, since your business card may get misplaced.
- Thank the legislator for his or her time and leave promptly.

Some suggestions for following up on a meeting with your legislator:

- Immediately after the meeting, record what occurred—whom you met with, what issues were discussed, the responses and/or commitments received from the legislator or staffer, and any follow-up needed.
- Write a thank-you letter to the official. Summarize the points you made in the meeting and reiterate what you want the legislator to do. If possible, include any follow-up information the office requested.
- Write an appointment for yourself in your planning calendar or organizer for a week or two or three later (or sooner, if necessary) to make a follow-up contact. The follow-up contact may be needed to find out if the legislator has co-sponsored your legislation yet, how the legislator voted on the bill if a vote was scheduled to take place, to ask if the legislator needs more information, or simply to learn the legislation's current status.

Writing, faxing, and e-mailing legislators

Public officials and their staffs pay careful attention to their correspondence (i.e. letters, faxes, e-mail) since it forms the major body of public and voter sentiment on pending legislative activity.

However, the volume of contacts they receive--especially e-mails--has skyrocketed over the past few years. According to a 2005 survey by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF), entitled "Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy," members of Congress are attempting to respond to roughly four times as many contacts as they were ten years ago, with virtually no additional staff. As the report states, "most of the increase in volume has resulted from citizens working through some kind of organized campaign, rather than on their own."

Although Congressional offices like the fact that more people are engaged in the policymaking process, they're not too thrilled about the form letters and e-mails which make up an increasing proportion of the contacts they receive. More than ever, offices value direct, heart-felt personal e-mails and letters. As stated by one House staff member CMF talked to, **"One hundred form letters have less direct value than a single thoughtful letter generated by a constituent of the Member's district."** Advocates must respond to the vast *quantity* of e-mails and letters offices receive by increasing the *quality* of their e-mails and letters, in order to cut through the noise.

Some tips for writing correspondence to your legislator:

- Be brief—keep your correspondence to one page if at all possible.
- Stick to one issue.
- Refer to legislation by its bill number or title. If you don't know the number or title of a bill, learn it!
- Be specific. Explicitly ask the legislator to do something (vote for legislation X, cosponsor bill Y, sign on to a letter opposing bill Z). Unless you ask for something specific, your legislator can and will respond with only vague niceties. Make it clear what it is you want him or her to do.
- Tell the legislator why and how the issue you're writing about affects you and your community. Personalize your message. Connecting the dots from policy to individual constituent like this is arguably the most important component of any communication with a legislator.

- Don't be disrespectful or nasty. If you know your legislator's position on an issue differs from yours feel free to tell him or her why, but be courteous and professional.
- Be sure to include your name and mailing address on your correspondence.
- Keep a copy of your correspondence. Like everyone else, legislative offices occasionally suffer from technological (and non-technological) glitches, and may lose track of it.

Follow up, follow up, follow up!

After you send in a letter or an e-mail, or make a phone call, it's highly likely that one of two things will happen:

- **You wait, and wait, and wait....** It is highly likely that you won't get a response back for at least two or three weeks. If it's been three weeks and you haven't seen anything, you need to do two things.
 - 1) Check on the status of the legislation you contacted them about. Has the bill already been voted on? Was it already reported out of committee? In other words, is your original request still pertinent?
 - 2) Contact the office again. If the status of the legislation has changed, send a second letter or e-mail thanking the legislator for voting the right way (or expressing disappointment that the legislator voted the wrong way), or making an updated request for action. If the issue is still pending and nothing's changed, call the office and politely check to make sure they received your original e-mail or letter, and offer to send it again if necessary.
- **You get a letter back on your general topic that doesn't address your specific issue.** Take a deep breath, and remember that more than 200 million letters and e-mails are sent to members of Congress each year. After you've done that, either call or write the office back and politely state that while you appreciate the response, you'd still like the legislator to address your particular issue (i.e., either take the action that you requested, or explain why they won't).

Notice the repeated use of the verb "politely." Don't get your nose bent out of shape, just respectfully make it clear that you care enough about the issue to continue paying attention. Consistent attention to an issue is what gets results.

How to Address Letters

United States Representatives

The Honorable Jane Doe
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congresswoman Doe:

United States Senator

The Honorable Jane Doe
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Doe:

For members of your state legislature, check the legislature’s website to find out how to correctly address correspondence. A directory of state legislature websites is available at the website of the National Conference of State Legislatures at <http://www.ncsl.org/public/leglinks.cfm>. As with all elected officials, members of state legislatures are addressed as “The Honorable...”.

State Assembly/Representative

The Honorable John Doe
{state} Assembly/House of Representatives
{capitol address}es
{city, state zip code}

Dear Assemblyman Doe:

State Senate

The Honorable John Doe
{state} Senate
{capitol address}
{city, state zip code}

Dear Senator Doe:

Using the telephone

Telephone calls work, too, and can be especially important when time is of the essence and the issue you are concerned about will be addressed in the next few days. When you call, you may not be able to speak directly with the legislator, but you can be assured that your message will be relayed to him or her by the staff person you speak with.

The same rules apply to phone calls as to other forms of communication:

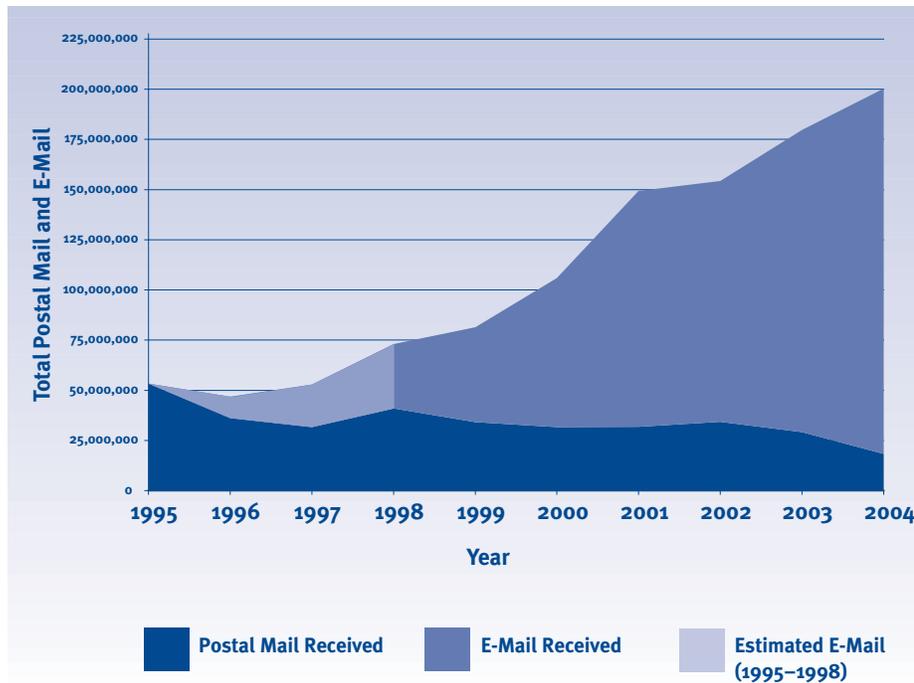
- Be prepared! Know what you’re going to say, what you want the legislator to do, what the bill number is, what stage in the process it’s at, etc.
- As with letter writing, keep the message simple and concise. Your phone call should take no more than three to five minutes to complete.
- Be sure to leave your name and address, and ask for a letter from your legislator in response to your call.
- Be courteous. Legislative staff work long hours for surprisingly low pay, and have many demands and pressures on their time. They are there to help you, but they are much more likely to do so if you are nice to them.

Although you will have done your homework before calling, don’t be afraid to ask questions. You can learn a lot talking to staff about the political field of play regarding your issue, timelines for committee action, etc.

E-mail

E-mail is by now the predominant form of communication with elected officials, at least in terms of volume. Virtually all of the explosive growth in communications with members of Congress over the past several years has been due to the use of e-mail.

Postal and E-mail Communications to Capitol Hill: 1995-2004



source: Congressional Management Foundation, 2005

This is a double-edged sword. While it's now easier than ever to send a message to your legislator, it's getting harder and harder for your legislator to see the individual trees within the forest.

As discussed earlier, it's now imperative that you minimize the chances that your e-mail gets lost in the deluge by taking the time to **make it a high-quality contact**, and by coming back later to **follow up**. According to the Congressional Management Foundation report, the number one implication of the increased volume for citizens and the grassroots community is:

Quality is more important than quantity. Thoughtful, personalized constituent messages generally have more influence than a large number of identical form messages. Grassroots campaigns should consider placing greater emphasis on generating messages of higher quality and reducing form communications.

(source: "Communicating with Congress," Congressional Management Foundation, 2005, online at http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/communicatingwithcongress_report1.pdf)

As with other forms of communication, stick to one issue, be brief, be sure to include your name and postal address at the body of your message, and keep a copy of your e-mail. The legislator will want to check to be sure that you reside in his or her district before responding.

Finding the Right Address

To find e-mail addresses for the United States Senate, go to www.senate.gov. E-mail addresses for the U.S. House of Representatives, can be found through www.house.gov. Many congressional offices encourage constituents to use e-mail to communicate with them, and have forms on their website for submitting comments. You can also visit ACA's Legislative Action Center at capwiz.com/counseling, and enter your zip code in the box marked "Elected Officials."

Testifying before a legislative committee

Legislative committees use hearings to gather information on an issue or piece of legislation. Being selected to testify before a legislative committee provides you with a valuable opportunity to advocate for the counseling profession. You do not have to wait to be invited to testify; if a legislative committee has scheduled a hearing on a bill or issue that affects professional counselors or is something upon which counselors have expertise, you can contact the committee and request an opportunity to testify. If the committee already has a full roster of witnesses, you can also submit written testimony that will be included in the hearing record. Hearing statements and testimony should be coordinated through your state counseling organization.

Some suggestions to keep in mind if you are allowed to testify:

- Do your homework and know your facts. Work with your colleagues, your state counseling organization, and your organization's lobbyist to make sure everyone stays on message. You may be part of a small group making statements, with each person assigned a specific part of the message to deliver.
- Find out how much time you'll have to speak. You may only be given one to three minutes to present your case, so make sure you hit your strongest points in the time you are given.
- If possible, find out who else is testifying at the same hearing with you. Most likely, others who are opposed to your position will be testifying. Try to anticipate and counter their arguments in your testimony.
- Write up your testimony ahead of time, and get feedback on it from your colleagues. Feel free to read your testimony at the actual hearing instead of trying to speak off the cuff, if you'd prefer. Either way, practice!

- Address your remarks to the committee chairman or chairwoman. This the person running the hearing. Be sure to thank the chair for the opportunity to speak.
- Prior to the hearing, offer to submit sample questions to the committee that you would like to be asked. Many legislators welcome this. Be prepared to answer any questions you suggest.
- You may get asked questions. This is a good thing! Don't be afraid; if you are asked a question and do not have the answer, just say so, and tell the committee member who asked the question that you will get back to them as soon as possible.
- Don't make ANY partisan remarks, whatsoever. Leave that to politicians.

Building rapport with legislators

You can enhance your effectiveness as an advocate by establishing a relationship with a legislator--or a member of his or her staff--that is based on more than simply asking them to do something (or not do something) once or twice a year. If you get to the point where your name is recognized, so that when a counseling-related issue comes up the legislator or staffer thinks of you, you've accomplished your goal. Getting to this point does not guarantee that a legislator will do what you want them to do, but it means they'll likely check in with you before acting on counseling-related issues.

There are several ways you can foster a relationship with legislators:

- Invite a legislator to address a meeting of your organization. Be flexible about the topic of the talk, suggesting general issues like education or mental health, or even how counselors can work more effectively with their legislators. A legislator may not be comfortable addressing issues that are highly specific to the counseling profession because they do not have enough information to make a good presentation. This is fine. Just get them there. You can educate them later.
- Invite your legislators to visit a program that you administer or work in. Legislators like to learn about what's going on in their district. If it is appropriate and would not be disruptive or invasive of the privacy of other participants, invite legislators to visit and learn more about a program or service you provide to a school or the community.
- If a legislator has done something noteworthy for the counseling profession or on issues that are important to the profession, recognize what they have done by presenting an award. But only recognize real accomplishments and effort. Don't present an unearned award just to try to gain access and favor. It won't work and will only embarrass you and the legislator.

- Attend “town meetings” and other forums sponsored by your legislators. If you get the chance, introduce yourself and let him or her know what you do. If there is no “burning issue” you need his or her help with at the moment, that’s fine; just say hello, thank them for coming out to speak, and ask for the name of the staff member you should contact if you want to talk about a counseling-related issue in the future. You’re building a relationship so that when you do need help you’ll be more likely to get it.
- Volunteer to work in political campaigns. If there’s a candidate you support, call his or her campaign headquarters and offer to volunteer. Even if you can only spare one night to help out, legislators appreciate any and all the help they get. They and their staff will remember that you helped out—and consider you a “V.I.P.” because of it (Working in campaigns can be a great way to network, too. You might find yourself stuffing envelopes one night next to a member of the school board or a physician who might later give you client referrals.)

REMEMBER, though, that political work is fine for individuals, but is prohibited for 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations. Most counseling organizations are tax-exempt, and are thus prohibited from engaging in any form of political advocacy.