

Communicating with Legislators

Elected officials care about what their constituents have to say. To make a difference, you need to be informed and engaged. You don't need to be an expert, but your insight on the local impact of policy helps elected officials understand which policies work and which have a negative impact on children and families. Whether you advocate as an individual or as part of a group, your efforts will benefit from a little planning.

Remember that in advocacy, respectful relationships build the foundation for change.

Before you communicate with a legislator, do your homework. Get to know your legislator by researching him/ her on the Wisconsin Legislature website at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov>.

- Learn his or her full name, length of time in office, and full-time profession.
- Learn about the demographics of the district and his or her voting records, committee assignments, and areas of interest.

Remember that legislative aides are key support staff for legislators, and are important gatekeepers who can facilitate your relationship with your legislator. Some aides also have substantial influence on policy issues and help to shape their representative's or senator's positions. Regardless of how much policy influence a particular aide has, it will benefit you to establish a good working relationship with your legislator's aide. Each one will appreciate any courtesies you can show, any help you offer the legislator, and any information you can provide to keep him or her fully informed.

In all of your interactions with policymakers and staff remember, remember these key points:

Be positive and nonpartisan. Legislators are turned off by threatening or argumentative advocacy. NEVER threaten a legislator ("I won't vote for you if you don't support this legislation.")! Don't argue. If it is clear that the policy maker will not support your position, just give the facts and ask him or her to consider your viewpoint. This will keep the lines of communication open for discussing future issues.

Be personal. Feel free to call your legislators' office to share your views. Visits are better than letters or emails. Personal letters and emails are better than form letters. Sharing your personal experiences and concerns during a visit or in a letter/email will make your message more compelling.

Be persistent and patient. Building a relationship with your legislator and his/her staff takes time. Also, on many issues it may take several years to pass legislation.

Stay on message. Focus your visit, letter, or email on one topic. Use separate communications for different topics. During a visit, work to return to your topic if the legislator changes the subject.

Never give inaccurate information. It is far better to tell a legislator, “I don’t know, but I will find out and get back to you.” Your credibility (and the legislator’s if he/she uses your information) is at stake. Be sure to follow up with the complete information.

Relax. Advocacy does not have to be complex or intimidating. It’s simply you exercising your right as a citizen and having a conversation to express your views to the person elected to represent you. You do not need to be an expert. Just share your concerns and values, knowing that your views as a voter are important to your legislator.

During the meeting

Introduce yourself to your legislator and his/ her staff. Thank the legislator for taking the time to meet with you. Write down the name of the staff person you met with so you can follow up with that person after the meeting. State the purpose of your visit. Briefly describe the issue(s). More information on your issue can be included on your fact sheet that you have already prepared. Be upfront if you are asking for something specific, such as support or opposition to particular legislation.

Make the issue local and relevant. Discuss the issue from your local perspective – how it affects his or her district and voters. Use local statistics, stories, and fellow constituents to support your issue. Remind the legislator that you are a constituent and tell them where you live in the district.

Personalize the issue. Describe why the issue is important to you. Tell the legislator your story. The more personal the issue, the more he/she will pay attention.

Be a good listener. Let your legislator ask questions as you present your viewpoint and answer them knowledgeably and factually. You do not have to agree with his/her views, but you should show that you are willing to hear them. Ask if he/she has any questions for you. Ask how you can be helpful. Show interest in issues of concern to your legislator and offer your assistance when possible.

Stay on topic. Be careful not to let the meeting stray off course. Be sure to get your concerns on the table before engaging in small talk. Let the legislator make comments, but don’t let him/her avoid the issue. Tactfully bring the conversation back on track.

Thank your legislator again for his or her time. Being courteous keeps the door open to future dialogue.

After the meeting

Write a thank you note. Regardless of his or her position, courtesy is important. A handwritten thank you note also gives you another chance to make your pitch. An email note is better than none, but generally a handwritten note will have more impact.

Update your legislator on the issue throughout the year. If new materials—editorials, fact sheets, letters to the editor—appear in support of your cause, send them to the legislator.

Calling a legislator’s office is an efficient way to communicate your position to a legislator. Before making the phone call, develop a concise list of points (no more than three) you want to make. If the legislator is unavailable, speak to the legislative aide.

Give your name and address to the legislative aide. This is extremely important because they want to be sure that you are a constituent.

(This information is based on the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families’ Legislative Advocacy Guide, www.wccf.org/pdf/legislative_advocacy_guide.pdf)