SECTION 3

Having Your Voice Heard: Communicating with Policymakers

Many ways to communicate with policymakers exist: email, phone calls, social media, and face-to-face meetings. Advocates often wonder which method is most effective and whether all are weighed equally. Each Congressional office has its own method for handling and "counting" different constituent communications. Generally, each policymaker gets a regular report from staff regarding how many emails, phone calls, etc. have been received on various issues and what positions constituents are advocating. They also get a report on who has visited the offices and what they have requested. No matter what method you use, the most important thing is to bring your concerns and requests to your elected officials to ensure your voice is heard.

Since all offices handle constituent communication differently, you might want to call each of your Members' offices and inquire on their preferred method of constituent input.

How to Contact a Member of Congress

Generally, you can reach your Members of Congress in the following traditional ways:

- Phone through the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121
- Email your U.S. Representative through: www.house.gov
- Email your two U.S. Senators through: www.senate.gov

*For specific tips on using social media to communicate, see section 4.

Communicating with Members of Congress is one of the easiest and most effective ways for advocates to build a relationship with policymakers on issues of interest and priority. If done correctly, whether you are sending an email or a Tweet, correspondence can result in garnering support for your public policy priorities.

When communicating with policymakers, use your personal information, as your employer might not share your views on the topic. For all forms of communication, be sure to include your full name, mailing address, email address, and phone number. If you are a federal or state employee, you must use personal email and your personal computer.

Keep a hard copy of what you send, as sometimes emails or letters are lost and you may need to send a second copy to ensure a response.

Tips for interacting with Congressional offices:

- **Do not overestimate what they know.** Staff members often require outside expertise. Yet, it is important not to be condescending or use jargon. It is smart to ask staff how familiar they are with a particular subject so you can tailor your remarks to their knowledge level. Never assume they know what may be a "given" to you. Staffers can't know it all; you serve a valuable role as a resource.
- **Do not underestimate Congressional staffers.** Legislators trust them, depend on them, and act on their suggestions. Young staffers have direct access to Members of Congress and will make recommendations and help direct their positions and actions. Junior staffers often are promoted to more senior positions, so it is important to treat all staffers with respect. Keep in mind today's staff assistant could be tomorrow's chief of staff.

- **Always be polite.** When addressing correspondence to any government official, use the proper forms of address. Even if you are angry, frustrated, or disappointed, be sure to use a polite tone and appropriate language; never be threatening, confrontational, or rude. The most effective way to communicate with your Members of Congress is the way you communicate with your colleagues, neighbors, patients, family and friends—clearly, concisely, and with respect and honesty. Also, take the time to thank your Member of Congress and his/her staff for the work they do and if your member has taken an action recently with which you agree, make sure you thank him/her for the support.
- **Identify yourself and why you are writing or calling.** In the opening sentence, make your request up front and identify yourself as a registered voter, constituent, and someone who cares about this specific topic.
- **If you know the Member or staff aide,** say so at the beginning of your message; this may alert the aide reading your correspondence to give your message special attention.
- **Be concise and informed.** To the degree possible, try to keep your email or letter to a single page. If you are calling, limit your call to no more than five minutes unless the staffer asks you questions and seems engaged in the discussion. You do not need to be an expert on the issue, but you should be familiar with the basic facts and points (e.g., name of the legislation and the associated bill number and why it should be supported or opposed). If you are requesting that the policymaker cosponsor a particular measure or are writing to express disappointment at a particular vote the policymaker cast, check the list of cosponsors and the vote record first at congress.gov to ensure that you have the most up-to-date information and all of your facts are correct.
- **Personalize your message.** Remember, you are an expert in what it is like to deal with the issue about which you are communicating—and as such, you have many experiences to share. Tell your own story and explain the relevance to the issue at-hand. Although form emails and postcards are counted, they often do not elicit a response from a Congressional office. Personal stories and illustrations of local impact are more easily remembered by policymakers and their staff than statistics and generic examples. Moreover, personal stories often are what spur policymakers to action—not statistics. The reality is that our policymakers often legislate by anecdote. Your own words are best and can influence the legislator's response or vote. If you are using a template letter, take a few moments to personalize it with your own experience. Also, you should include relevant state or local information to explain how the issue affects your family and community.
- **Be focused in your request.** Although you may wish to address multiple issues, it is best to focus on only one or two issues of top priority. Your communication will be clearer and policymakers or staffers will be more receptive because you have not overwhelmed them with too many requests.
- **Offer assistance and serve as a resource.** Policymakers and their staff often are overworked and overwhelmed, so offer your assistance; they will appreciate your input and help. If you have an article of interest, be sure to include it with your correspondence, or refer to it and indicate that you would be happy to provide it should they be interested.
- **Ask for a response.** Because policymakers and their staff work for you, you have every right to (politely) ask for a response and hold them accountable if your communication goes unanswered. In fact, entire systems, processes, and staff exist in Congressional offices to respond to constituent input. It is important to note, however, that because of the volume of constituent input, it could be weeks or months before you may receive a response. Be clear in your correspondence that you are requesting a written response regarding the policymaker's views on the issue or legislation you addressed.
- **Make sure to follow-up.** If you do not receive a response in a timely fashion (a month for most offices, a bit longer for Senators from large states like California and Texas), follow up with the office by phone or with another letter (email is best) with your original note attached and indicate you have not received a response and would like one. If you receive an unsatisfactory response to your correspondence, write or call again to express appreciation for the response and be polite, yet firm, in communicating that the response was not what you anticipated or requested.

- **Keep in touch.** Make sure you stay in contact with the offices of your Members of Congress to establish a relationship and make yourself available as a local resource on your issues of interest. There are times when you and an elected official will have to "agree to disagree," but, over time, you also may find that the policymaker may be supportive and helpful on other matters.

Tips about Regular Mail Service on Capitol Hill

As a result of anthrax attacks in fall 2001, the U.S. Postal Service mail is handled differently by Congress. Most incoming mail is irradiated to ensure it is safe for handling. This process takes quite a while and often damages the contents. Therefore, sending written correspondence by email is advised—or make a quick phone call.

Tips about Email

Each Congressional office maintains a different policy about how email from constituents is handled. Most Members of Congress have an email form on their website. To access the form, visit the individual Member's Web page (www.house.gov or www.senate.gov), find your Member's website, and click on "contact." Many Congressional offices provide a generic, automatic acknowledgement that your email has been received but then will follow-up with either a specific email response to your issue or a letter via regular U.S. Postal Service. A handful of offices still do not respond individually to email but count the input and inform the policymaker as to how many people have written about the particular topic and what position they are advocating.

Becoming an Advocate and Trusted Resource

GET INFORMED

- Know who represents you at the federal, state, and local levels.
- Visit your elected officials' websites to find out their contact information, biographical information, and their stances on various policy issues.
- Call the offices to find out which staff member handles health care.
- Anytime you contact an office, do your homework so you reference the correct bill and have some basic background information, if needed.
- Read national and local news sources and health policy blogs to stay abreast of key issues and developments.

CONNECT

- Sign up for alerts from professional or advocacy organizations of which you are a member.
- Subscribe to your elected officials' email newsletters.
- Sign up for health-related organizations' newsletters to stay on what is happening in the health policy field.
- Think about your existing connections to policy in your community–whether you know someone serving in public office or know of someone who may be able to introduce you to someone who does.
- "Like" the Facebook pages for your Members of Congress. Follow your Members of Congress on Twitter.
- Attend a town hall meeting or other local event where you can meet your Member of Congress.

TAKE ACTION

- Contact your elected officials via phone, email, or letter to voice your opinion.
- Seek local meetings by contacting the Members' schedulers or district staff or come to Washington, DC.
- Offer yourself as a resource and ask how you may be of assistance to the office.
- After the meeting or call, follow up with a thank you and any information you said you would provide.
- Check in with the staffer with relevant information, when appropriate. This will keep you in the forefront of their mind, should they need a resource on your area of concern.
- Continue to call and write the office–you never know when your issue may be relevant or resonate.

How to Meet with Your Members of Congress and Their Staff

Meetings with Members of Congress and/or their staff are terrific ways to weigh in with policymakers on issues of interest and priority. Such meetings can be conducted at Congressional offices in Washington, DC or "at-home" in district offices. If done correctly, meetings can result in garnering support for your public policy priorities. Visiting with policymakers and their staff enables you to educate them about your concerns, offer yourself as a resource, and establish a relationship that can prove mutually beneficial over time.

- **Schedule an appointment.** The first step to meet with a Member of Congress or their staff is to reach out to the office to secure the name and contact information for the appropriate staffer. Email is often the best way to send an initial meeting request. Propose a few dates/times for a meeting but remain flexible as staffers maintain a very busy schedule. Include a brief preview of your agenda for the meeting, so the staffer is prepared for the upcoming meeting. Finally, be sure to follow up on your request, additional phone calls and emails may be necessary to schedule a meeting.
- **Prepare and be on time.** Members of Congress and their staff are very busy and often have to be in more than one place at a time. Be respectful of their time by giving yourself plenty of time to go through security, find your way to the office and announce yourself to the receptionist. If you will be attending in a group, discuss with your colleagues in advance what you will be covering in the meeting. Be sure to select a primary spokesperson and determine who in the group will raise which points and requests. You should be clear about your roles and who will cover the different topics in the meeting. Open by thanking the Member/staffer for his or her time. Be sure that everyone in the group identifies herself/himself—first and last name and connection to the issue—and remember to mention that you are a voting constituent and provide some context about where you live/work in the district/state. If the Member/staffer has been helpful in the past or has taken action that you appreciate, be sure to say thank you up front. Prior to your meeting with the Member/staffer, it is best to get a sense of what matters currently are pending before the Congress, the committee(s) on which the Member sits, and any previous positions taken on the issue. For resources that list this type of information, visit www.house.gov, www.senate.gov and congress.gov.
- **Be brief and clear**, as you typically will have only 10–25 minutes for the entire meeting. Cover only a few (one to three) topics. It is best to prepare talking points beforehand to ensure that you and your colleagues "stay on message." Anticipate the kinds of questions you may be asked from both supporters and opponents. Do your best to be prepared to answer such questions in the meeting. If you do not know the answer, acknowledge the question and indicate since you are not certain of the answer that you will follow-up with them later (and remember to do so). Do not assume that the Member/staffer is very knowledgeable about the issue you are discussing—be sure to begin by asking their familiarity on the issue and, if necessary, providing them with some background. If you are not discussing a specific piece of legislation, explain that you want to provide background information or provide your perspective on an issue of importance to you and your community.
- **Provide a personal story or real-life illustration** of the problem, as personal stories are more easily remembered and more compelling than statistics. As necessary, briefly cite evidence or statistics to support your position, particularly any local, regional, or state data. However, be sure not to overwhelm the policymaker or staffer with too many statistics or references to studies (this kind of information can be in the materials you leave behind or can be sent with your thank you note). Discuss how the policy change will have an impact on your family and community. Be concise and honest about the issue(s) and the solution(s) and make clear the relevance of the issue(s) to their constituents.
- **Be polite and listen carefully** to the policymakers' or staffers' views and comments. Even if you disagree, it is important to be courteous. Be flexible and consider the opposing view. Do not be argumentative or threatening. You may agree to disagree on an issue today and find that you can agree and work together on another matter tomorrow. Much of health policy advocacy is about building and maintaining relationships.

- **Bring a concise set of materials with you to leave behind.** However, do not hand over the materials until the close of the meeting, or the Member/staffer may choose to start reading the material and only listen to you with one ear. Early in the meeting indicate that you have materials to leave on the topic(s). Make sure to leave your personal (home) contact information. If you leave a business card, make it clear that you are visiting on your own time and not representing your employer, unless you have received such clearance in advance from your employer.
- **Make sure to get a response—in a nice way.** Ask directly, and politely, for the policymaker's views and position on the issue. Do not let the policymaker or staffer distract you with other issues (gently steer the conversation back to your issue), avoid responding, or dismiss your specific concerns with a broad statement such as, "Of course, I support pediatric health." Stay on message and the topic as politely as possible. However, if the Member truly is undecided or the staffer is not familiar with the Member's position on the issue, do not force a response—reiterate your interest in knowing the Member's position, offer to answer any additional questions/provide additional information, and request a follow-up letter once a decision has been made on your request. Ask politely for a good day in the next week to 10 days for you to follow up on your request(s).
- **Report back to your advocacy organization** so others can follow-up with the office with additional information and reinforce the message(s) you delivered.
- **Follow-up with a thank you note** to the Member/staffer referencing the date of your meeting, who was in attendance, and the issues discussed. Your follow-up letter should express appreciation for the time and consideration extended to you during your meeting, reiterate your request(s), and ask for a written response from the office. Check with your advocacy organization; there may be a template thank you letter available for you to use.

Who's Who in a Congressional Office

ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Chief of Staff (CoS): Second highest ranking person in the office after the Member; responsible for overall office operations and evaluating political outcome of various legislative actions.

Scheduler: Responsible for apportioning the Member's time between hearings, meetings, events, and other activities and making any necessary travel arrangements.

Staff Assistant: Junior staff member usually responsible for answering the phones. Keep in mind that today's staff assistant can be tomorrow's Chief of Staff.

LEGISLATIVE STAFF

Legislative Director (LD): Monitors the legislative schedule, works with the CoS to develop priorities, advises on legislation, develops legislation, and oversees the legislative staff.

Legislative Assistant (LA): Offices have multiple LAs who each handle a portfolio of issues; LAs take meetings, draft legislation, and work with the LD to advise the Member on legislation.

Legislative Correspondent (LC): LCs read and draft responses to constituent mail; LCs may also assist LAs with meetings, when necessary.

STATE/DISTRICT STAFF

State/District Director: The State or District Director often serves as the Member's proxy at home - attending events, coordinating events while the Member is home, and acting as a liaison to the community.

Community Representative: Some offices may also have mid-level staff in the district office that work with the state or district director in representing the Member at home.

Caseworker: Staff, often in the state, but sometimes in DC, that act as a liaison between constituents and federal agencies and to assist with resolving constituent problems (passports, Veteran benefits, etc.).

COMMITTEE STAFF

Each Committee also has staff that specialize in issues related to the Committee's specific jurisdiction. These staff members may work generally for the Committee or may be assigned to a specific Committee member's office. For example, the HELP Committee Chair's health LA is from the staff of the HELP Committee.

Other Tips

When visiting Capitol Hill or a federal building in which your Member of Congress maintains an office, you could encounter long lines to get through security. While security is similar to that of airports (bags and all contents from your pockets must be put through the X-ray machines and you must step through a metal detector), you are allowed liquids and you will not need to show your driver's license (unless entering the Capitol Building). Allow yourself plenty of time to get through security.

The Congressional schedule is very fluid and Members and staffers often are pulled away for various events and activities that are not known in advance (*e.g.* last minute press conference, meeting with the Chairman of a committee the Member serves on, etc.) and, as such, your meeting could be delayed or bumped (the Member may not be available and you instead may meet with staff). Bottom line—be flexible. Also, space on Capitol Hill is at a premium so your meeting could occur in the reception area in the office, in the hallway, or downstairs in the coffee shop. Do not take any last-minute meeting changes personally and make sure you always are gracious and flexible.

Also, don't forget your camera! Even if you don't meet with the Member, you never know who you might run into in the elevator!