

“How to” Effectively Communicate with Legislators

Legislative term limits create constant turnover of legislators resulting in loss of experience, knowledge, collegial networking and problem solving. For this reason, effective legislative communication is now more important than it has ever been.

For us to accomplish the family medicine agenda, family physicians must have legislators who understand the value of having a medical home and who are passionate in their support for family medicine. Term limits have upped the ante, so to speak; we must be constantly diligent in our efforts to educate legislation about our goals and objectives. Effective and ongoing communication has never been more important.

The old fashioned ways of communicating are still best even though the impact and effectiveness of email has grown in importance, particularly at the federal level, since the anthrax scares in DC. Telephone calls and letter writing fall into the mid-range of effectiveness while face to face contact remains the most effective means of communication (in whatever form) with any elected official.

Meeting with Legislators

- Plan your visit carefully. Make an appointment by contacting the legislator’s staff – be sure to specifically let them know what you want to discuss. Have a mental agenda and make sure you are clear about what you wish to achieve in your meeting. If appropriate, prepare material to assist in making your point. Always plan to arrive a few minutes earlier than your scheduled meeting time.
- Be patient. It is not uncommon for a legislator to be detained. Schedules are very hectic and emergencies arise, so be understanding.
- It is important to be a good listener. Granted you are there to make your point but it is important to give the legislator a chance to have his or her view heard also. Ideally the meeting should be an exchange of thoughts and information not a monologue by either of the participating parties. Listening to what the legislator says can provide insight into follow-up materials you might provide later.
- Be responsive. Do your best to answer questions but don’t be afraid to admit if you don’t know some of the answers. You can always follow-up later on questions that you were unprepared to answer.
- Keep it short and to the point. Close the meeting by quickly summarizing key points. Always be sure to thank the legislator for his or her time. You should summarize your points again in the thank you letter you send after your visit.

Writing Letters

- Use personalized or office letterhead. Stationary should always include your name, return address and phone number. When writing about a particular piece of legislation, always include the bill number, title and subject matter.
- While you should express your opinion clearly, don't be threatening or offensive. Cover one topic per letter and state your message within the first two paragraphs. Subsequent paragraphs can be used to expand on your position, but keep the letter short and simple.
- It is important for you to use your own words. Sample letters can be used to help get your started, but it is best not to copy them verbatim. Form letters are not nearly as effective as a letter with a personal touch.

Telephone Contacts

- Be prepared. Be sure to have the appropriate information in front of you, such as the bill number or subject matter and be familiar with the key points of your position. You may need to speak to the legislator's staff. You should afford them the same respect and courtesy that you would give the legislator. These staff members are usually well informed and can be terrific allies once you win them over to your point of view.
- Once you have had a phone conversation with the legislator, send them a follow-up note restating your position and thanking them for their consideration. When appropriate, it is also well advised to send a thank you note to the staff person as well.

Email

- Email to legislators is being widely used by many groups around the state. Emails have grown in value and are certainly preferred over no communication at all; sometimes with the speed things move through the legislature, email is your only option.
- When emailing, put your position in the message line (for example, "Oppose SB 4"). That way if the message isn't read at least the message line will convey your position. Remember legislators are just like everyone else these days – they all vary in technological abilities and personal comfort with technology in general. Use email only if other communication options aren't available or viable due to timing.

General Rules That Apply to All Communication Vehicles

- It should be understood that legislators are not always going to share your point of view. Sometimes you will need to agree to disagree. Do so with courtesy and thank the legislator for listening to you.

- Respectfully make a few strong points for your position and ask several thought provoking questions that will encourage the legislator to think more about your position and why you have taken the stance you have.