

The “Do’s & Don’ts” of Effectively Engaging Legislators

Influencing legislators and their decision-making is one of the most important opportunities provided to American citizens. Providing legislators with information on issues and the impact of pending legislation assures that legislators are exposed to the varied implications of every law and regulation. With their competing issues, limited time, and hectic legislative schedules it is important that contact with your legislator provides maximum benefit to your issue/program. Whether you write, call or visit personally, the following Do’s and Don’t offer tips for effectively engaging your legislator.

DO

- ◆ Get to know your own Representative and Senator. No one has more influence with a legislator than a voting constituent!
- ◆ Let the legislator know if you are a constituent or your program serves their district
- ◆ Be sure your legislator knows who you represent, or what group you are a member of – this is particularly important when contacting legislators from districts other than your own
- ◆ Remember that personal communications are most effective – in-person contacts, telephone calls, hand-written notes are most likely to get their attention
- ◆ Be brief and concise in initial written materials - more detailed information can be provided if asked
- ◆ Make clear what your position is and what exactly you would like the legislator to do. When possible, refer to specific bills by name and number
- ◆ Be polite, brief and specific. It’s much better to say you don’t know the answer but will get back with it, than to give a wrong answer or misleading information
- ◆ Be a good listener and hear what the legislator has to say on the issue
- ◆ Provide your legislator with “real world” examples of how the issue affects you, your program, or their constituents.
- ◆ Show courtesy at all times - respect the legislator’s right to disagree and to vote against your issue
- ◆ Know how the process works: committee system, timetable, how bills come for vote, etc.
- ◆ Draw on your grassroots support – legislators care about issues that affect *their own* constituents

DON’T

- Be pushy. If you are told that a legislator cannot see you, ask to make another appointment or leave a note and follow up at a later time.
- Be sarcastic, critical or threatening. And don’t embarrass or continually argue with a legislator. Don’t say to a legislator, “You promised me....” If anything, say “I understood you to say....”
- Lie or mislead a legislator about the importance of an issue, the opposition’s position or strength, or any other matter
- Extend your visit beyond a reasonable amount of time.
- Be misleading with a legislator – either about the facts, the extent of the issues or the opposition to your position.
- Try to tell the legislator how to vote on a bill. Instead, point out how a vote one way or the other will affect the issue...and the legislator’s constituency.
- Waste a lot of time with legislators who are publicly committed to an opposing position. Focus energy on legislators who are uncommitted or open-minded on the issue
- Show anger or resentment toward a legislator who votes against you. The legislative process is a long and on-going one, and chances are that you will need to gain the support of that legislator another time on another issue!
- **Forget to say “Thank You!” to the legislator or policy-maker and to the staff...and don’t forget to follow up with a hand-written Thank You note!**