

Advocacy 101

Basics for Communicating With Your Legislator

- Be courteous, respectful, and friendly
- Be brief and accurate
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out," rather than guessing
- Mention if you are a constituent
- Listen carefully
- Be appreciative; thank them for something they have done in the past even if it doesn't relate to the issue you are currently talking about
- Ask for something specific, either support or oppose a certain type of legislation, or a bill #

Write Your Legislator a Letter

A well-written letter can be a very effective way of communicating with your legislator. Only a small percentage of citizens take the time to articulate their position in a personal letter to their legislator. Because of this, most legislators read their mail personally and give a great deal of weight to what their constituents have written.

Keep the communication basics and the following tips in mind when writing your letter:

- Write about only one issue per letter
- Be polite and sincere
- Include supporting facts for help with this, look at "talking points"
- Describe the problem and provide reasoning for your position
- Propose a solution
- Refer to a specific bill and ask for a specific action; i.e., support or oppose Bill #...
- Include your name, address, and phone number on the letter
- Address your letter in the following manner:
 - On the envelope: "The Honorable (First Name and Last Name)..."
 - In the letter: "Dear Assemblyman/woman (Last Name)," or "Dear Senator (Last Name)"
- Please keep us informed! Send a copy of your letter to us at nj@drugpolicy.org or give us a call at 609-396-8613

Call Your Legislator

When calling your district office, the legislator's staff will most likely take your call. If you don't get to speak with the legislator directly, that is fine. Ask to speak with the legislators' Chief of Staff or Legislative Aide, and they will pass your message on to the legislator.

When calling, keep the Communication Basics in mind as well as the following suggestions:

- Talk about one issue per call
- Be brief and to the point
- Refer to specific legislation and ask for a specific action, i.e., support or oppose Bill #...
- Mention if you are a constituent
- Provide your contact information
- Please keep us informed! Let us know if and when you are calling, and if the legislator that you spoke with has pledged to take any action on your issue.

Visiting Your Legislator

A face-to-face discussion with your legislator and/or their staff can be an effective means of communication. However, it requires a bit more preparation than a letter or phone call. Always keep the Communication Basics in mind and follow the suggestions below.

- Call our office at 609-396-8613 or visit the website at: <http://www.drugpolicy.org/newjersey/> to obtain fact sheets and talking points to help prepare for the meeting
- Dress appropriately (wear a suit if possible). First impressions are everything.
- Treat the person that you are trying to influence with respect and courtesy
- Listen carefully, and if the legislator disagrees, speak respectfully. Try to understand the basis of her/his objection, and politely provide some information and rationale that supports your viewpoint
- Always thank them for spending time with you

Writing a “Letter to the Editor”

Letters to the editor are an important part of being a citizen lobbyist, and can have a great effect on public opinion and policy. Once you have drafted a letter, send it in to all local newspapers, including dailies and weeklies. The more newspapers you send it to, the better the chances of having your letter published. You can visit this website <http://www.nj.com/newspapers/> to obtain a list of some New Jersey newspapers. As always, keep the communication basics in mind, and follow the directions below.

- Keep your letter short and concise. 250 words should be the maximum length.
- Stay on message. State the issue that you are concerned about; refer to specific legislation when possible; and state what action should be taken.
- Write in simple language. Editors are looking for letters that a large audience will understand.
- Sign your letter. Newspapers will not publish letters that are not signed.
- Provide contact information at the bottom of your letter. This will only be used for the newspaper to verify that you are indeed who you say you are. They do not publish personal contact info.

We hope that you find these tips helpful when engaging in citizen lobbying. Thank you, and good luck!! Feel free to contact Drug Policy Alliance New Jersey for help in contacting your legislators. You can reach us at 609-396-8613.