

COMMUNICATING WITH CONGRESS: How To Deliver the Message

It is your right (and, in a democracy, your responsibility!) to inform Congress about issues of concern to you and your profession. You and the organizations that represent your professional interests are in the best position to educate lawmakers about data issues, including the consequences of Federal policies, the usefulness of Federal programs, and uses of data for research, evaluation, and policy development.

For your voices (individually and collectively) to be heard, you must build and cultivate relationships with members of Congress and their staff. This takes time, effort, and persistence; don't expect results from a single letter or meeting.

These tips for communicating with Congress will help you deliver your message effectively. Communication can be in writing (letter or e-mail), by telephone, or in person; a combination of all three over time is best!

In General

- ✓ Don't be arrogant, but don't be intimidated. Legislators don't know everything.
- ✓ Don't overwhelm legislators and staff with technical information. Keep your message simple and clear. Summarize your issues, highlighting major points.
- ✓ Speak from experience, using specific examples and relating your concerns to your state or district whenever possible.
- ✓ Ask for something specific: Cosponsorship of a bill; a letter to the chairman of a committee or a federal agency; a vote for or against a bill.
- ✓ Be persuasive, even emotional, but never threaten or demand anything. Always be polite, and try to say something positive about the legislator's work.
- ✓ Offer to be a resource for information in your area(s) of expertise.

In Person

- ✓ Arrange for a meeting with your elected representatives when they are home in their district office. You can also request a meeting if you are visiting Washington.
- ✓ Small group meetings are effective. Select one person who knows the issues well and is a confident speaker to be the primary spokesperson.
- ✓ Never argue with a legislator or staff person in a meeting. And don't argue with or contradict others in your group in front of a Member.
- ✓ Stick to your allotted time in a meeting. An average meeting is 15-20 minutes, so prepare your presentation based on the time allotted. If the lawmaker wants to extend the meeting, he or she will let you know.

- ✓ Take notes, and offer to follow-up if you don't know the answer to a question. No information is better than giving misinformation.
- ✓ Leave a packet of additional, but brief, printed materials that further explain your issue.
- ✓ Send a thank you note.

In Writing

- ✓ Write often to your elected representatives, so that they become familiar with you and the issues you care about.
- ✓ Letters should focus on one or two major points at a time and should be no more than two pages; one page is even better.
- ✓ Put your address on the letter; envelopes are usually discarded.
- ✓ Send your letter by fax, if possible, or as an e-mail attachment. Alternatively, you may write to your representatives at their state offices. But mail to Washington rarely arrives quickly, if at all, since the anthrax scare.
- ✓ Don't include extraneous or lengthy information about yourself, your organization, or your experience. Get to your point quickly and clearly.
- ✓ Be timely.
- ✓ Tips for letters apply to e-mails, as well. Most congressional offices will only accept e-mails from their own constituents.

By Telephone

- ✓ Be prepared and well informed.
- ✓ Call the Washington, DC office to discuss legislative or policy issues. Identify yourself, where you live, and ask for the legislative assistant handling the issue you are calling about.
- ✓ Get to your point quickly. State the issue and the position (or action) you hope the lawmaker will take. (Staff are more likely to take your call, or even call you in the future, if they know you won't tie them up on the phone for a long time!)

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