

## Communication Tips

### Writing A Letter/Sending a Fax/E-Mail

The time-tested method of sending a written communication to your legislator remains one of the most effective ways to deliver your message to senators and representatives. What's new, however, is that you can now deliver the message by mail, by fax or by sending an e-mail. However its received, letters and other forms of written personal communications remain probably your most effective communication tool - short of personal visits. Letters from constituents that are well written, and briefly explain the issue and the proposal's impact will be noticed in a congressional office. At the back of this guide are some tips on sending faxes and e-mail. You can access information on fax numbers and e-mail addresses via the NACHC Internet Advocacy Action Alerts at <http://www.nachc.com>.

Addressing your letter to a senator or representative:

The Honorable (full name)  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510  
Dear Senator (last name)  
or  
The Honorable (full name)  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515  
Dear Representative (last name)

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#### Sample Letter

Dear Senator Smith:

#### *Opening Paragraph:*

- State the subject of your letter
- Use the bill number or name, if available
- Identify yourself and your health center

#### *Body of Letter:*

- Explain the issue simply and factually at a level the senator or representative will understand.
- Give a local example of the impact of the issue to make the legislator care.
- State your position on the bill or provision, whether you support it or oppose it.
- Be polite. Don't threaten. There's always another issue to fight another day.

- Thank the senator or representative for their attention to the issue.
- Let the senator or representative know you are a resource for more information.

### **Tips for Effective Letter Writing**

- Write to the legislators who represent your health center and to the legislators who represent the district where you live.
- Limit the length of your letter to no more than two pages, one if possible.
- A single, well-written letter from a well-known constituent may be more likely to influence a legislator's decision than an avalanche of post cards. Modify sample letters provided to you to deliver your own unique message.
- **Fax** your letter to your senator or representative. Regular mail is unpredictable because of security concerns
- Give your credentials when appropriate.
- Avoid personal criticism.
- Express appreciation for past or future support.
- Ask the legislator to send you a letter stating his/her position on the issue.
- Send a copy of your letter to NACHC (7200 Wisconsin Ave. Suite 210, Bethesda, MD 20814 or E-mail: [mwetherhorn@nachc.com](mailto:mwetherhorn@nachc.com) or Fax: 301/347-0459) and to your state association so they can coordinate their lobbying activities with your grassroots efforts.

### **PHONE CALLS TO THE HILL**

When time is short, a personal phone call to legislators, their chief of staff or key healthcare aides may be the most effective method to communicate your views. As with all grassroots advocacy, your call is most likely to receive attention if you have developed a personal relationship with the legislator or staffer. Often, calls are "logged" as for or against a particular issue. Sometimes, you may not get past the receptionist. Nonetheless, making a well-timed call can be particularly important. And, especially when combined with calls from your colleagues on the same issue, may tip the balance in your favor. So, don't hesitate to call. If you don't know your senator's or representative's telephone number in Washington, D.C., you may get connected to their offices by calling:

U.S. Capitol Switchboard - (202) 224-3121

#### *For Whom Should You Ask?*

- Ask for the senator or representative if you know them personally.
- If you don't know the senator or representative, ask to speak with the legislative assistant who handles your issue. For most issues, that probably will be the legislative assistant who handles health issues.
- If you can't reach a legislative assistant, leave a concise message. Congressional offices do count the number of calls they receive on an issue - pro and con - and relay that information to the senator or representative.

## **Tips for Making Effective Phone Calls**

- Focus on a single issue, making two or three key points in your phone call.
- Have talking points - or your own notes - in front of you when you call to stay focused on the message you want to deliver. NACHC or your state association often will provide you with talking points when they ask you to communicate with Congress.
- Localize the issue to demonstrate the impact on the legislator's own constituents.
- Clearly state the action you wish the senator or representative to take on the issue (vote for, vote against, offer an amendment, delete a provision, etc.).
- Keep your call brief - not more than three or four minutes.
- Don't bluff if you are asked a question you can't answer. Tell them you'll get the answer and get back to them. (If you need help finding the answer, contact NACHC or your state association.)
- Leave your name and telephone number with the staff to whom you've spoken in case they have any questions later.
- Jot down the name of the legislative assistant you spoke to and put it in your phone book. Next time, you can ask for him or her by name and begin building a relationship. Staffers are more likely to listen to and return phone calls from people they know.
- Send a thank you note!

## **MEETING WITH YOUR LEGISLATORS**

Face-to-face meetings are the most effective method of communicating with senators, representatives and their staffs. In order to be most successful, they also require extensive planning, an understanding of the needs of legislators and, perhaps, a rehearsal.

Legislators will usually be interested in visiting a health center. And staff is often searching for opportunities to use the legislator's time at home most effectively. Therefore, a visit to your health center will often serve everyone's interests.

It is good to meet in Washington, D.C. when Congress is in session. However, meetings in the district or state during congressional recesses and weekends are particularly effective. Recesses are usually scheduled around holidays and for most of the month of August. Congress normally adjourns for the year in mid-to-late fall.

### *Requesting A Meeting:*

- Contact the senator's or representative's Washington, D.C. office and ask to speak with the appointment secretary/scheduler.
- Explain whom you represent and the reason you want a meeting with the senator or representative. Ask the scheduler how you can arrange a meeting. You may be referred to the district office if you are requesting a meeting in your state, or the Washington scheduler may help you.

- If you are inviting the legislator to visit your center, send a letter of invitation from the CEO and/or board chairman (or a board member who has a personal relationship with the legislator).
  - Send the letter to the office recommended by the scheduler - either the Washington office or the district office.
  - Ask the scheduler the amount of lead time needed to schedule a health center visit and send your invitation far enough in advance.
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### **Tips for Conducting An Effective Office Visit**

- Introduce yourself and any others in your group, stating where you are from and what health-care organizations you represent.
  - If you are going with a group, decide in advance who will lead the discussion and what points you want to make.
  - Keep your meeting short and simple. Say why you've come and succinctly outline the case for your position on a particular piece of legislation or the issues that prompted your meeting.
  - Give examples of how the issue affects your health center and the senator's or representative's constituents.
  - Stay focused on the two or three key messages you want to leave with the legislator. It is easy to get off-track and run out of time, particularly when dealing with seasoned politicians.
  - Answer any questions asked of you, but if you don't know the answer - don't bluff. Tell the legislator that you don't know but that you will promptly get back to him or her with an answer.
  - Leave behind a one-page position paper on your issues to remind the legislator or staff of the purpose of your visit. Include your name and telephone number on the paper in case there are follow-up questions.
  - Offer yourself as a resource to the legislator and the staff in responding to health care questions.
  - Be prompt but be patient. Senators and representatives may be late for meetings due to their full schedules, or they may get interrupted during your meeting.
  - Don't be disappointed if you end up meeting with staff, rather than the senator or representative. Legislators depend on advice from their staff because it is impossible for them to follow all issues themselves. Staff are gatekeepers and they can sometimes be the real driving force on an issue.
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## **Tips for Conducting an Effective Health Center Visit**

Follow all of the principles for conducting an office meeting, plus:

- Extend the length of the meeting to include a brief tour of two or three important patient care areas of the health center. (Allot about one to one-and-half hours for a tour, plus a "sit-down" meeting.) Choose areas that demonstrate the impact of your health center on the health and well-being of the legislator's constituents. Walk the tour yourself in advance to make sure everything is in order and that you deliver your intended message.
- Provide opportunities for the senator or representative to meet key health center staff - a physician, a board member who knows the legislator, and an employee such as a nurse or social worker who works directly with patients. Inform participants in advance so they can be prepared.
- Prepare a fact sheet on your health center to give to the senator or representative. Include information such as: number of patients served, number of staff, employees and volunteers, amount of indigent care provided, Medicare and Medicaid patient load, etc.
- Notify your state association about the planned visit. Your state association can provide you with background information on the senator or representative and help you compile any statistics or information needed to illustrate your concerns.
- Make arrangements to photograph the legislator's visit and include a story on the visit in your center's publications. Send the senator or representative copies of the stories. If local press coverage is desirable, coordinate solicitation of coverage with the legislator's press secretary.

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## **Follow-up After the Meeting**

- Send a "Thank You" note, thanking the legislator for his or her time and briefly restating your issue. Include any follow-up information that was promised.
- Provide feedback on your meeting to your state association and NACHC so that they may adjust their lobbying strategies, if needed.

## **BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH CONGRESSIONAL STAFF**

Building a good working relationship with congressional staff is as important as developing a relationship with your senator or representative. Staff is more accessible. And legislators rely heavily on information provided by their staffs in making decisions and taking positions on legislation. You are most likely to be connected with staff, rather than the legislator, when you call a congressional office. Staff may be substituted for legislators in face-to-face meetings.

Staffers' level of expertise on health care issues will vary considerably, depending on the committee assignments of the legislator and the tenure of the staffer. Senators or representatives who sit on the key committees responsible for health care will most likely have personal staff members who focus on health care. Staff of legislators without health committee assignments

may have health care as only one of many issues for which they are responsible. Many staffers are young, intelligent, and enthusiastic people who will appreciate your efforts to explain complex health care issues in easily understood terms - particularly if health care is not their primary issue.

Each senator and representative has a personal staff in Washington, D.C. and in his or her district or state. The majority of the staff is in Washington, D.C. where they are focused on day-to-day legislative issues. Congressional home offices are supervised by a district office manager or director and usually include a few caseworkers. If you want to meet with your legislators while they are at home, the district office is likely to be involved in the scheduling.

While district office staff are usually not experts on legislation, they should still be included in your grassroots advocacy strategy. They are the eyes and ears for the legislator on how issues are playing back home. Information you provide on the local impact of proposed legislation will be well received by them and communicated to Washington. However, communication with district staff does not take the place of communication with Washington, particularly when Congress is poised to act on an issue in a very short time frame.