
Building Relationships and Communicating with Legislators

The effectiveness of our work often depends on the quality of our relationships. We must develop relationships with legislators and their staff members before we are faced with a legislative issue. Strong personal relationships are the best means of influencing policy-makers. Personal visits, letters, phone calls, faxes, and emails also are important, especially when they come from constituents who are well known, highly regarded, and have gone out of their way to be helpful in a variety of ways in the past. Building relationships takes time and careful effort, but it is the most effective way to shape the thinking of those who decide public policy.

How do you go about building such relationships? In much the same way that you cultivate friendships: by being friendly and personally helpful. “Personally helpful” cannot be emphasized enough. Become a useful and trustworthy source of sound information and insight, contributing your personal time to professional and political needs and interests. Your own party affiliation should not restrict you. Every elected officeholder represents an entire state, legislative district, or local government, Republicans, Democrats, and independents alike. You do not have to be a member of the legislator’s political party to work together and even to become friends. .

Are you a registered voter? If not, go register!

Do you know who your representatives are?

Find your State and Congressional Representatives here:

<http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Representatives/myrepresentative.aspx>

Find your local government representatives here: <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials/>

Relationship building activities:

- Write and/or call legislators on current issues.
- Make personal visits to Tallahassee or the home district offices on current issues or broad problems.
- Invite legislators to attend a Health Freedom Florida Meeting
- Host a coffee or attend an event that is posted on their website.

- Speak at a Town Hall or other public meeting, sharing with the audience the importance of joining Health Freedom Florida.
- Consider inviting legislators to attend special events where they might get some publicity.
- Get personally involved in legislators' campaigns and the activities of your political party.

Personal Visits

Personal meetings with legislators and their key staff members are the most effective way to make your case on an issue. Such visits also are a good way to introduce yourself as a constituent. A personal meeting can be difficult to accomplish with a policymaker's busy schedule, but remember that you are offering an important business contact. You can arrange the meeting with the policymaker directly or through staff aides.

The following suggestions will help make the best use of your time and the legislator's:

- Always make an appointment. Arranging the first meeting may require patience on your part, but be persistent. Later, as you become known as a resource, gaining appointments will be less difficult. This situation will occur especially if you also become known as a campaign contributor, political activist, or a Health Freedom Florida member who can muster support on the issues from a variety of groups through your coalition activities.
- Be prepared to meet with key legislative personnel or committee staff members if the legislator is unavailable at the last moment. Briefing these people before your visit also may be useful so that they can prepare the legislator. Staff aides are often more knowledgeable about details of a specific issue than lawmakers themselves.
- If several individuals join you in the visit, decide in advance who will be the principal spokesperson. That individual, of course, should encourage others to participate in the discussion to share particular expertise or experiences.
- If you want to discuss a specific issue, make sure you are thoroughly familiar with all aspects of it before going into the meeting.
- When talking to legislators, try to be concise, well organized, and mindful of the other person's time. State your view firmly, but be attentive to the policymaker's position also.
- Open the discussion by reminding the legislator who you are, whom you represent (i.e., yourself, your business, your Health Freedom Florida Chapter), and why you are there. Know the issue and the bill number. Clearly state your concern about the issue, how it will affect you, your institution, and the community. Avoid harsh accusations. Be polite and respectful. Often, we forget how we sound when we are particularly passionate about an issue.

- Always be truthful and never mislead. Your personal credibility and that of Health Freedom Florida is at stake. If you do not have the answer to a question, do not improvise. Promise to get back to the questioner with the necessary information, and be sure to do so promptly.
- Come prepared with a brief (one-page) position paper that summarizes your points with facts, and leave it with the legislator or staff aide. If a lengthier document or answers to questions are relevant, send them later with a thank-you note.
- To gain a favorable vote, follow up with letter(s) and calls to your legislators and their key staff advisors at appropriate points as the issue progresses.
- Maintain the relationship. Get your name on legislative mailing lists. Find occasions to see your legislators again in appropriate circumstances, and write to them on the issues from time to time. If you obtain reports or data that will be useful to legislators and their aides and that you can share with them, send those documents with a brief personal cover note. Eventually, you may even find policymakers coming to you for information, help, or your point of view on new issues.

Writing letters or e-mails:

Make sure you spell your legislator's name correctly!

Address the envelope with "The Honorable [full name of legislator]."

During the Legislative Session, send letters to Tallahassee.

Between sessions, send letters to the district address.

Writing the letter.

Begin your salutation with "Dear Senator [last name]" or "Dear Representative [last name]."

Make it personal. An individually written letter, rather than a form letter, will make a better impression on your legislator. Legislators will respond to their constituents, so be sure to include your name and full address, including ZIP code.

Be specific. Your purpose should be stated in the first paragraph; don't bury your main point. If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, be sure to identify it by its full name and number, e.g., House bill (HB): _____, Senate bill (SB): _____.

State your position.

- Explain why you support or oppose this particular issue.
- Tell your legislator what effect you think a particular issue or bill, if it becomes law, will have on you, your children, business, or community.
- Back up your opinions with supporting facts. Facts make an argument more tangible and convincing.
- Suggest a course of action and offer assistance.
- Be courteous and to the point, keeping your letter focused on one issue.
- If you have another issue to address, write another letter.

- Avoid abbreviations or acronyms, and don't use technical jargon.

Ask for a response. Indicate to your legislator that you would appreciate a reply that includes his or her position on the issue.

Follow up. Follow the legislative action vote. If you agree or disagree with your legislator's vote, take the time to let him or her know.

Telephoning:

Telephone calls to state legislators' offices are often taken by a staff member.

Identify yourself.

- State your name and the organization that you represent or the town where you live.
- Ask to speak to the legislator or to the aide who handles the issue you would like to comment on.
- If he or she isn't available, leave a message.
- Take down the name and title of whomever you speak with and ask that the legislator send you a written response.
- Treat aides and staffers with kindness and respect as they can become your most influential liaisons between you and your legislator.

State your position.

- For example, say, "I am calling to support/oppose HB _____/SB _____."
- Ask about the legislator's position on the issue.
- Tell your legislator what effect you think a particular issue or bill, if it becomes law, will have on you, your children, business, or community.
- Back up your opinions with supporting facts. Facts make an argument more tangible and convincing.
- Elaborate on only one or two points. Too much information may confuse your message
- Suggest a course of action and offer assistance.
- Don't assume that your legislator is already an expert on the issue. Be prepared to educate him or her, using local or personal examples in your explanation.
- If you are asked to supply information about the issue, do so as soon as possible.

Be courteous. Thank the person who took your phone call for his or her time and consideration.

The advice on this document has been copied and/or adapted from:

National League Nursing

<http://www.nln.org/docs/default-source/advocacy-public-policy/building-relationships-with-your-legislators-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

America Academy of Family Physicians legislative action center the AAFP's legislative action center (www.aafp.org/)*

Florida Senate Website: <https://www.flsenate.gov/About/EffectiveCommunication>