



Public Policy: Tools You Can Use

Public Policy Advocacy: In Washington and Back in the District and State

Advocating at home or in the nation's capital

Clearly, the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that in-person visits to congressional offices have been suspended. Most of the activities described here can be accomplished by setting up online appointments until it is safe to meet personally in the district office or Washington, DC, office.

You can come to DC or you can flex your advocacy skills to influence your members of Congress from home. This guide will explain the basics of public policy advocacy. Know when to and where to exert your influence. Do this by staying informed, communicating with your legislators, and building a relationship with them and their staff.

Knowing when, where, and how to exert your influence in 3 easy steps:

1. stay informed of legislation
2. communicate with your member of Congress
 - Introduce yourself, your work, and your issues of interest and expertise.
3. Build a relationship
 - Get to know your legislator and his/her staff:
 - Through letters, e-mails, and meetings in the district, state, and DC offices
 - Be a resource for information on health and aging issues
 - This will make you valuable to the legislator and her or his staff.

First step: Staying Informed

Track legislation important to you:

There are also several ways that you can access legislative information through websites.

- For information on pending legislation, copies of bills, committee reports, and congressional schedules, use the Library of Congress website:

<https://www.congress.gov/>

- Ask your legislator’s office for information you need. Identify the bill or committee report by name and number.
- Go to the websites of organizations who have an interest in your issue to see if they are tracking legislation and or have issue briefs or letters on the legislation.

Key Committees

Find out which committees play a central role in developing legislation and shaping policy in your issue area. The committee websites broadcast live hearings and post witness testimony from committee hearings. See the SNA Key Committees Document.

Second step: Communicate with Your Legislator

Write (email), call and fax your legislator’s office whenever you would like to share your thoughts on a proposed piece of legislation, or when you would like to bring an issue to your legislator’s attention.

Letter (sent as an attachment to an email):

- o Legislators rely on letters to find out what constituents and advocacy organizations are thinking. Letters can play an important role in establishing a relationship with a legislator, explaining an organization’s policy position, and eliciting a response from the member of Congress.
- o *Email or fax letters*; do not use regular mail because postal mail can take 3 to 4 weeks to arrive in DC due to testing for dangerous enclosures.
- o If you know the legislator, use her/his first name; your letter will receive more attention; otherwise, use “Dear Representative (last name)” or “Dear Senator (last name).”
- o The address for senators and representatives are, respectively:
 - The Honorable (insert senator’s name)
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510
 - The Honorable (insert representative’s name)
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
- o Use your own words. Personal letters are better.
- o State the topic you are writing about, and your position on it, in the opening sentences.
- o Use personal experience or concrete examples from the member’s state or district to make your case.
- o Refer to bills by name and number, for example, Special Needs Trust Fairness Act of 2015 (S. 3489/H.R. ___).
- o Keep it short. Limit the number of topics you address in your letter. You can always write another letter to discuss additional issues.
- o Raise questions. A well-formulated question can get a personal response.

- o Be polite, positive, and constructive. Don't plead, and never threaten.
 - o Be timely. Write before decisions are made and action is taken. But don't write too long before – a letter received six months before a vote will probably be forgotten.
 - o Write to thank your legislators when they take an action you agree with. If a staff member is particularly helpful, thank her/him too—or mention your gratitude to your legislator.
 - o You can also draw attention to an issue by writing letters to the editors of local newspapers. Members of Congress always read letters in their hometown newspapers. Write a clear, concise message (less than 200 words).
- Email:
 - o The same suggestions and caveats hold for email as for written or verbal communications.
 - o Legislative offices are inundated with emails at times, especially when controversial legislation is in the news. Sometimes an advocacy group will instruct its members to participate in an e-blast. Know when a phone call may be the better way to reach your legislator.
 - o Email addresses are in the congressional directories and www.senate.gov and www.house.gov.
- Fax:
 - o Faxes are rarely useful any longer for the legislative process.
- Telephone
 - o Congressional offices pay close attention to issue-related phone calls as a measure of voters' sentiment. An influx of calls can sometimes change a legislator's vote, but even a few calls can make a difference by alerting the member to a concern.
 - o When you call, ask if your senator or representative could send you a written response. This will help ensure that your call gets counted. You can also ask if the office has received other calls on the same issue and, if so, what position most of the callers are taking on the issue.
 - o Where to call: most senators and representatives maintain one or more offices in the state or congressional district they represent.
 - o To call a DC office, call the Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121 and ask for the legislator's office.

Communicating with the White House

Sometimes you may want to call or write the White House to register your opinions. The Administration uses calls and letters to the White House as a gauge of public opinion. Communicating with the Executive Office can be as important as calls and letters to Congress.

- When writing to the White House, the proper salutation is "Dear Mr. President."
The address is:
The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

Washington, DC 20500

- Email a letter to President@WhiteHouse.gov.
- Place calls to the White House comment line at 202-456-1111 or leave a message with an operator.
- You may want to ask to speak to the specific staff member who covers the issues about which you are calling. These staff can be exceedingly difficult to reach.

Third step: Build a Relationship

Develop lasting relationships with your members of Congress by contacting them every month or two; this will ensure that they recognize your name and trust the information you provide. Your messages can range from specific requests for votes or co-sponsorship to information, ideas, and stories you think would be useful. In addition to sending messages to your member of Congress, you can build a relationship with the staff in DC and at the district level. Get to know your legislator and her/his staff by attending and participating in town/city hall meetings conducted by them. Inviting your members of Congress to visit your program/organization will help to highlight how legislation affects their constituents and to further humanize the issue.

Your members of Congress expect to hear from you and, as an expert and viable source of information and advice, your members of Congress *should* hear from you.

This document was written in part from Alzheimer's Association and Families USA materials.