

## How to Communicate with Legislators

If you are not a full-time political activist, you may be approaching the political process like a freshman sitting in an Algebra class. If you are, do not worry. Many feel the way you do. But, once they have a little coaching and a little experience, many novices become enthusiastic about participation in the legislative process. Take heart - just as thousands of students across the state successfully unravel the mysteries of Algebra each year, if you follow these simple suggestions, soon you will know your way around the marble floors of the State House.

**1. Know your representatives.** Get to know your representative on a personal basis. It is critical that you know who represents you and that your representative knows the issues that are important to you. If you do not know your representative, how can you hold him or her accountable? Unless you know who represents you, the legislative report card (i.e. the representative's voting record) will mean nothing to you.

While it is critical that you know your personal representative, you must also know any and all other legislators that will have a vote on the issue that is of interest to you. View the legislative process as a series of spaces on a game board, with each set of decision-makers as a new hurdle, and concentrate on the next group of people to be voting on your issue. Do not feel that you have to tell every legislator about your bill or issue at one time. You can spread yourself too thin and be ineffective. The focused approach is better.

When applying the focused approach, think of yourself as a detective. As a detective, you must figure out why each legislator should have an interest in your side of an issue. What is his or her current and former occupations, business associations, club memberships, hobbies, past-times, causes he or she supports or opposes, characteristics of constituents, personal wealth, spouse's and children's interests, personality, and past and present committee assignments. When communicating with your legislators, interpret your cause in terms of the legislator's needs and beliefs - not yours.

**2. Know how to communicate with your representative.** When you can, communicate in person but be sure to make an appointment in advance. Remember to be brief, specific, courteous, and positive. Thank your legislator for his or her time and follow up the visit with a note.

When telephoning your representative, similar rules apply. Remember to call during normal business hours. Unless it is a real emergency, refrain from calling elected officials at odd times because they have other jobs and families as well.

When writing to legislators limit yourself to only one subject. In the first paragraph identify yourself and the purpose of the letter. If you are writing about specific legislation, cite the house of origin and the bill number, for example, SB1 or HB 3000. Always write the letter in your own words; never use a form letter. Try to limit the letter to one page and avoid negative or threatening language. (In other words, this is not the time to state that you are a citizen and a taxpayer.) If you feel strongly about an issue, it is okay to show some emotion in your letter. A handwritten letter is acceptable so long as it is legible. Always proofread and review your letters before actually mailing them. Remember to address your letters properly.

The same rules listed above apply to email. Remember that email is a written

correspondence to your elected official. When corresponding by email to your legislator, still pay attention to the rules of grammar.

**3. Know relevant legislative staff.** All legislators rely on legislative staffers. Legislative staffers assist legislators in a variety of ways from research to organizing their schedules. It is important to know that legislative staffers are not policy makers, and they are prohibited from taking a personal interest in the passage of legislation. Remember that public employees as well as public officials are subject to the South Carolina Ethics Reform Act of 1991. The principal duty of legislative staff is to provide objective, factual information and data, but they often lack the time to be fully acquainted with every issue. You may know an issue better or in greater depth than they do, and if so, you may be in a position to educate staff. Whenever you assist legislative staff, you may very well be assisting yourself in the process.

**4. Know your issue.** This is worth repeating. Nothing is probably more critical than knowing your issue inside and out. Conduct a thorough analysis of the facts. Research and discuss both the pros and cons of the issue, using unbiased, non-partisan information that cuts through political rhetoric and focuses on the essential facts. It is particularly important that you find out as much as possible about your opposition and their arguments. Get your hands on as much of their propaganda as possible: pamphlets, books, newspaper articles, or anything in which they have made a public statement. Being familiar with this information will enable you to prepare to persuasively rebut their position. While researching, do not forget to consider the effects that institutionalization of your issue will have on other issues. In other words, take a few moments to look at the big picture.

**5. Know how to work in coalition with like-minded organizations.** One of the major problems most groups have, especially groups without a continuing, long-standing presence at the capitol, is getting legislators' attention. Legislators are confronted with numerous issues and causes, all of which are competing for their time. You can amplify your message and gain legislative attention if you work in coalition with like-minded organizations. Working in coalition offers a tremendous advantage to working on your own. Even though you have a tremendous network of members and supporters out there, you have limited resources. You can do an awful lot on your own, but you can do an awful lot more if you work with other groups and combine resources.

SCANPO is an excellent way for nonprofits to turn up the volume and make their collective voices heard. With over 800 diverse member organizations, SCANPO is a coalition of like-minded organizations. SCANPO is working hard to educate our members about public policy issues of interest to the nonprofit sector and to offer opportunities for them to learn how to navigate. There are a number of ways for you and your nonprofit organization to get involved.

• **Join SCANPO's Advocacy Network.** The Advocacy Network serves as a grassroots program for nonprofits when public policy issues arise that have an impact on the nonprofit sector. Currently, there are more than fifty members of this network. Participants may be asked to call on their legislators, make media contacts, or write letters to the editor in an effort to watch out for the best interests of the nonprofit sector. Network members have the benefit of being on the inside track with regard to nonprofit legislation.

• **Join SCANPO's Volunteer Advocacy/Public Policy Committee.** SCANPO's public policy program focuses on issues of broad common interest to South Carolina's nonprofit sector. The committee has approved the following public policy agenda:

- I. Promote the development and capacity of South Carolina's nonprofit Sector
- II. Enhance the impact of nonprofits as public policy advocates for the causes and clients they serve
- III. Increase collaboration and policy dialogue with government.
- IV. Encourage charitable giving and volunteering.
- V. Promote accountability of the nonprofit sector.

• **Watch for a new legislator spotlight feature on SCANPO's website.** SCANPO believes it is important for nonprofit organizations to know and communicate with their elected officials. Over the next few months, SCANPO will be introducing you to various members of the South Carolina General Assembly. SCANPO encourages you to use this website feature as a means to get to know these public officials a little better.