

How to Communicate with Decision Makers and other Influential People

A Guide from the ACLU of Ohio Legislative Department

Speaking up makes a difference!

- Letters and phone calls alert officials that people are concerned.
 - In-person conversations make your concerns “real.”
 - Sometimes officials will change laws or policies – and sometimes even their own proposals – based on what they hear from people in their district.
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Who to talk to:

- Decision Makers: Elected and appointed officials at all levels of government – federal, state, and local – and their staff
- Influential People: People other people listen to, such as community leaders, faith leaders, business owners, media.

How:

- Key is to build a positive relationship
 - Identify yourself
 - Point out shared connections
 - Personalize the issue
 - Use stories and examples
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Methods of Communication:

Letters & e-mail

- Keep it brief
- State who you are and what you want
- Hit your three most important points
- Personalize your letter
- Personalize your relationship
- You are the expert

Phone Calls

- Keep it extremely brief – like leaving a message for someone
- Who you are & what you are calling about
- The action you want them to take
- How you can be reached

Meetings & Lobby Days

- “Lobby days” are events planned by an organization to get a big number of like-minded people to all visit officials at the same time.
- Group meetings
- Individual meetings

Meeting Tips

- Be prompt & patient
- Introduce yourself
- Introduce the issue
- Keep it short & focused
- Provide personal & local examples
- Saying “I don’t know” is okay
- Listen

In Passing

- Not all communication is formal
- Having a quick, informal word with an influential person puts it on their radar
- Have a 30-second speech

Approach depends on their position

- Unknown – Educate and listen.
- Friendly – Thank them. Do some information gathering.
- Unfriendly – Establish a dialogue. Do NOT be confrontational. Find out why they take that position, and see if you have any common ground.

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The “Ask”

- Every communication – letter, call, or visit – should include an “ask.”
- An “ask” is what you are requesting that the official does.
- Specific ask – such as “vote no”
- Soft ask – such as “please oppose any policies that would....”

Tips for Successful Advocates

Do show respect – Your appearance and presentation should be respectful and appropriate. Do not dress or speak casually. Address the person properly, such by their title or “Mr. or Ms. So-and-so.” Be sure you spell and pronounce names correctly.

Do be knowledgeable – Before you meet with or write a public official or other local leaders, learn something about them. Know what their job is, where they are from, and what their priorities are. Know if you have anything in common with them, such as whether you went to the same school or go to the same church. Above all, know your subject. Nothing hurts your credibility more than not knowing your issue or lying about the extent of your knowledge.

Do be honest – A public official is not going to respect you or work with you if they can’t trust what you say. Don’t exaggerate. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so and offer to find out and get back to them.

Do say thank you – Public officials, local leaders, and their employees are busy people. Whether speaking by phone, in person, or in writing, always thank the person for their time and attention... even the ones who don’t agree with you.