

## YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

### Action Guide for Advocacy in State and Federal Government

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Things have changed in federal and state government. The days when influencing legislation action meant directly lobbying a handful of powerful party leaders and committee chairs are over.

Today, every member of Congress and state legislature has a much greater impact in the legislative debate, because the role of individual legislative leaders has been diminished. This means industry's approach to influencing legislation has changed as well. Active, informed constituents—individual voters like you—now have a more important role to play in the legislative process. In today's legislative arena, you can truly make a difference.

The reason is simple. As a voter, you have power over your members of Congress and your state legislators. To remain in office, legislators must satisfy their constituents—people like you.

### Getting to Know YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

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- Communicate with your elected officials through visits, calls, and letters—but don't be a pest.
- Attend candidate meetings during elections and introduce yourself.
- Participate in your legislators' town meetings.
- Make yourself an information source by providing your officials with current facts on the nursing home industry.
- Work on the campaigns of those candidates whose views are closest to your own.
- Regularly ask the question, "How can I help?"

### Communication TIPS

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#### Always:

- Thank the legislator for considering your views.
- Express opinions honestly and thoroughly.
- Tell your legislator specifically what you want.
- Provide useful information to support your position.
- Ask for his or her support on the issue.
- Thank the legislator again for spending time with you, and indicate that there may be other issues you will want to raise with him or her at another time.

#### Never:

- Express views that are excessively ideological or narrow.
  - Confront or threaten the legislator.
  - Behave arrogantly.
  - Overwhelm the legislator with technical detail.
  - Misinform the legislator.
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## 3 ways to Communicate with YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

1. Personal letters.
2. Telephone calls.
3. Face-to-face meetings.

In all grassroots communications, you want to make sure you do certain things and that you avoid a number of other things.

Whether you communicate in writing, by phone, or in person, keep two goals in mind:

1. You want to influence your legislator's decision on a specific piece of legislation.
2. You also want to build a relationship with your legislator that will make you a valued source of information on important issues, both now and in the future.

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### Tips for Composing AN EFFECTIVE LETTER

Here are some things to keep in mind when you write a letter to an elected official:

- Write only to your own elected officials. They're the ones you have the power to help elect or defeat.
- Write as a constituent, using your home address and/or letterhead.
- Identify your subject closely—describe the legislation about which you are concerned, and identify it by bill number if you can.
- Stick to one issue—don't raise a host of issues.
- Be brief.
- Stress the public benefits/harm that will result from the discussed legislation.
- Emphasize how the legislator's constituency will be affected by the legislation.
- Support your position with facts.
- Avoid angry or abusive comments, and never threaten to retaliate at the polls.
- Ask the legislator to support your position.
- If you don't get a reply, or if you get one that is unsatisfactory, write again or call.
- If the legislator votes your way, write or call to say "thanks." If s/he doesn't vote with you, send a note of thanks for considering your position. Either way, the official will know you are watching.

### Tips for Calling YOUR LEGISLATOR

A telephone call can be a very effective way to communicate with an elected official. Follow the general approach outlined in "Tips for Composing an Effective Letter," and make sure you ask for the legislator's support.

Your federal legislators have offices in Washington and in the local district. Your state legislators have offices in the state capital and in the local districts.

Reaching your members of Congress by phone in Washington is especially easy. You don't need a member's phone number or office address. Just call the US Capital Switchboard at 202-224-3121 and ask for the member by name. The operator will transfer you to the legislator's office.

Whether you call your legislator in his or her local district office, in Washington or the state capital, ask to speak with the member directly. Don't be surprised if you are told the legislator is unavailable.

If the legislator is unavailable, ask to speak to the aide handling the particular matter of concern to you. Explain your views to the aide carefully, ask that they be presented to the legislator, and ask for a response.

Always follow up your call with a brief letter, thanking the official and the staff member by name for their time and interest and restating your position.

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## Tips for Meeting with YOUR LEGISLATOR

You can arrange a meeting with your elected official the same way you would arrange to visit any business or community leader. Follow these steps when organizing your meeting:

- Try to meet your legislator in the home district, rather than in Washington or the state capital, whenever possible. He or she visits the home district regularly to “keep in touch,” and there are far fewer distractions.
- Call the legislator’s office and identify yourself as a constituent.
- Explain to the staff person who takes your request the nature of your concern, and indicate that you would like to arrange a brief meeting with the legislator.
- If the legislator’s calendar is full, ask if he or she will be available in the near future.
- If the legislator will not be able to meet with you before s/he votes on your issue, ask to meet with the staff person who is handling the issue or is most familiar with the issue.
- If a meeting can be arranged send a brief written communication to the scheduler confirming the specifics of the meeting—including the date time, location, and topic for discussion.
- To prepare for the meeting, follow the same basic steps outlined in “Tips for Composing an Effective Letter.”
- Provide a one-page summary of the issue you wish to discuss and the arguments in your favor. You should leave this material behind after you visit.
- After the meeting, send a brief thank you letter including the date, time, location, and topic which was discussed.

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## Tips for writing a LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Just as a letter sent directly to your elected official can have tremendous impact, so can a letter to the editor published in your local newspaper. Elected officials, their staff, and other influential readers examine these pages everyday. They read the letters to gauge constituent sentiment in their home district.

A letter to the editor is an especially effective communication tool because it ensures useful media coverage of the points you believe are most important, in your own words. Here’s how to write an effective letter to the editor:

- Find out the newspaper’s requirements for considering letters, and comply with them:
  - Should it be typed and double-spaced?
  - What is the maximum length the newspaper will consider?
- Write as a concerned, informed citizen—not as an employee of a company.
- Add something new to the debate, rather than repeating what others have already said.
- Avoid emotion.
- Get to the point quickly.
- Support your assertions with facts.
- Make your own case, rather than refuting someone else’s.
- Outline concisely the legislative or regulatory action you believe needs to be taken.
- Explain how the public will benefit from your position.
- Sign you name, give your address and phone number, and offer to discuss the letter with the editor if there are questions.