



## **COMMUNICATING WITH POLICY MAKERS**

Members of Congress and your state representatives are bombarded by paid lobbyists and special interest groups, but they really want to hear from us -- their constituents. The common thought is the legislative staff takes notice when a Congressional or State legislative office hears from even FIVE of their constituents! In today's electronic society, email is considered the most effective way to communicate with legislators. The email message is quick, provides a written copy of the request and is easily categorized and filed by the legislative staff.

**Remember**, the legislative staff usually controls the information flow to your elected officials.

For best results when presenting your position and communicating what you need or want from the legislator or staff member be:

- Brief,
- Clear,
- Accurate,
- Persuasive,
- Timely,
- Persistent,
- Grateful, and
- Polite.

To strengthen your position, collaborate with other OHN advocates and partners in the occupational health and safety community. Collectively, OHNs can better understand the process, monitor legislation, and assess strengths and weaknesses of a particular issue. Finding common ground on an issue sometimes brings together strange bedfellows, but makes for a stronger coalition.

### **Tips for Telephone Calls**

- Although email is generally the most effective means of communicating, there may be times when a phone call directly to your federal or state policy makers is needed.
- Phone calls are particularly effective when immediate action is warranted, for example, when a vote is about to be taken or if you're trying to get an appointment to meet with a legislator or his/her aides.

- Depending on the level of their representation, most will list phone numbers for their office in Washington or your state capitol on their personal website.
- Federal officials will also have an office in their home state.
- Your call may be answered by a secretary, an aide, an intern or even the legislator. All can document your message and route it appropriately.
- Draft a brief statement or outline of your key points before you make the call. Otherwise, you may omit important information you wanted to convey.
- Introduce yourself as a constituent and an occupational health nursing professional in your State/Congressional District.
- Clearly identify the reason for your call; be sure to state the name and number of the specific bill you are referencing if legislation is pending. This information is available in Thomas for federal legislation. See <http://beta.congress.gov/>.
- Clearly state your position and specifically ask them to vote 'yes' or 'no'. It is okay to ask for your legislator's position on the issue, but do not argue.
- Legislators like to hear personal stories; briefly share your personal experiences regarding the issue and what influenced your opinion.
- Be respectful of the legislator's or staff member's time.
- Offer to provide additional information if needed.
- Remember to thank him or her for their service and taking the time to listen.

## **Tips for Legislative Visits**

### ***The Basics***

Legislators want to hear from their constituents about issues of concern and usually try to meet with voters when scheduling permits. You will find the experience very rewarding if you have the opportunity to visit your federal or state legislators.

Here are a few quick tips to help you have a successful visit.

- A personal visit to your legislator's office helps you develop a more personal relationship with your legislator and his or her staff. Remember, a visit with the staff is often as effective, or even more so, than with the legislator. Sometimes staff members will already have background knowledge of an issue, especially if it is within their legislative area, and this will allow for an in-depth discussion.
- Email the legislator's office in advance and request an appointment. See the attached Sample Request for an Appointment as a guideline for your email.
- You want to make the most of your meeting so it is vital you are prepared. Legislators and their staff have limited time and resources to spend on one issue. You must go into the meeting with a few key points that you can cover in less than 10-15 minutes. But, you must have good background knowledge to answer questions they may have.
- Dress professionally. Your legislator and staff members are generally in strict business attire, and you want to project the same image.
- Remember, you are the expert; you know more about health and safety issues in the workplace than they do.

- Be sure and arrive on time. Elected officials have very tight schedules, especially when in session. Although it is critical you are on time for your appointment, you need to anticipate legislators or their staff will arrive late or have the meeting interrupted by other business. You need to consider these potential delays if you schedule multiple meetings on the same day.

### ***Before You Go***

- Visit your legislator's website and get background information on them such as:
  - Committee and sub-committee assignments
  - Key leadership positions in the House or Senate and on committees
  - Their previous support of occupational health and safety related programs or bills
  - The length of time in office and if/when they are up for re-election
- Plan your visit – have your key points written out and rehearsed so you know exactly what to say and how you want to present your message.
- Meetings do not usually last for more than 20-25 minutes. Plan to introduce yourself and get your key points across in less than this time to allow for questions or discussion.
- Remember, legislators want to hear personal stories about how this issue affects you, your workers or community members. They hear from so many paid lobbyists that they appreciate a fresh perspective.
- It is also important to prepare a concise and well organized single page (front/back) fact sheet with information about the particular issue you are discussing. Be sure and have your contact information directly on your fact sheet so staff can reach you if needed.
- Be sure you remain focused on your main message. Remember, you are trying to get the official to take your side on the issue. Do not criticize his or her previous voting record or vent any personal frustrations with government or its officials.

### ***Prepare to Tell Your Story -- "The Ask"***

Keep these points in mind as you prepare for your meeting:

- Begin with a brief description of occupational health nursing, AAOHN's mission and a few of your key responsibilities
- Consider what hazards or worker health & safety issues you observe in your workplace and around your state
- Discuss the challenges occupational health nurses face dealing with problems these hazards or issues pose for workers
- Consider any solutions AAOHN and/or the nursing profession have identified
- Try to include examples of your personal experiences, actual situations you observed or stories from workers and other OHNs

- Think about the overall benefits or consequences to worker health and safety if legislation is passed or fails to be passed
- Be prepared to tell your elected officials exactly what you want them to do – this is called the “ask” and is the entire reason for your visit

### ***During the Visit***

- Please turn off all cell phones and other electronic devices.
- Anticipate you may not meet with the legislator, but with staff instead. These meetings are as productive and often more productive than meeting with a legislator.
- Be sure to introduce yourself. Thank your legislator and/or the staff for taking time to meet with you and for any previous support from the legislator on issues favorable to occupational and environmental health.
- Although you have a prepared statement, allow openings for questions. There may be legitimate concerns you can address that would sway the legislator to vote in your favor.
- Be honest, straightforward and realistic. Never mislead a legislator about the importance of an issue or the opposition’s position.
- Don’t be afraid to say you don’t know the answer to a question. You only want to give accurate and correct information to maintain your credibility. If you don’t know an answer, offer to research the issue further and email the legislator’s staff with your findings. However, do not make promises you cannot keep.
- Also, ask what additional information on the current issue, or other worker health and safety issues would be helpful. Offer to research the topic for the staff. This provides a natural vehicle for follow-up.
- Take plenty of business cards for sharing and collect businesses cards for each person with whom you meet.
- Take a picture for your newsletter or local paper with you and your legislator if the opportunity presents. Don’t be embarrassed to ask; they generally relish positive publicity.
- Do not be surprised if the meeting with your legislator gets cancelled, especially when Congress is in session. Leave your Fact Sheet and a short note saying you regret not being able to meet.

### ***After Your Visit***

- Shortly after your visit, send a follow-up email thanking the legislator and their staff for meeting with you.
- When you email with the additional information or materials committed to obtaining during your visit, you can also remind the staff member of any requests made on your part and deadlines for follow-through on their end.
- You can strengthen your relationship with your legislator by continuing to communicate with his or her office. Invite the legislator to your worksite or AAOHN chapter meeting to see what is going on in their community or request to meet with staff in your legislator’s district office to discuss your issues.

- Send your legislator's office a copy of any photo or printed materials where you discuss your visit.
- Stay in touch with your legislator's office by emailing and requesting support for other issues related to occupational health and safety or the nursing profession.
- Make sure to get on your legislator's email list (the link is usually on their home office website). Often they can meet constituents in their home districts during breaks away from Washington, and they also will send emails letting constituents know when they are having open events in their home districts.

### **Speaking at a Public Meeting**

- Another way to communicate with public officials is to participate in a town hall, city council or other public meetings in which citizens are invited to share their views. Take this opportunity to share your expertise as an occupational and environmental health nursing professional and educate your elected officials, the media and other citizens in the meeting.
- These public meetings may be regularly scheduled meetings with your local and state government or when your U.S. Congressional delegates are visiting the state.
- The meetings allow policy makers to hear from a broad group of constituents, often on a wide range of concerns. Occasionally, a public forum is held to hear from the public on a specific topic.
- This type of public meeting is a real grassroots effort because all of the participants are generally local residents rather than paid lobbyists. This opportunity to advocate publically for occupational and environmental health and safety issues allows you to:
  - Educate policy makers and the public
  - Attract increased attention to the issue
  - Obtain media coverage for the issue and the occupational health nursing profession
  - Be recognized as the expert and an advocate for the health and safety of your local workforce and community environment.

### ***Tips to Maximize Success When Speaking at a Public Meeting***

- Identify the details of the meeting. Contact the policy maker's office and ask if you must sign up in advance to speak, who the other speakers are, the time limit per presentation, and other general guidelines regarding the agenda or topic of discussion.
- Be prepared with accurate, current and relevant information. Use the latest statistical and evidence-based information available to support your position.
- Think strategically. Position yourself to speak as early in the meeting as possible when the media are most likely to be present and everyone is more tuned in to the presentations.

## Communicating with Policy Makers

- Use your network. Contact other OHNs and community partners with an interest in the issue and encourage them to speak on the same issue. If there is a limit on the number of speakers, often the entire group may stand together with one or two representatives who speak for the group. There is strength in numbers and comfort in having peers for support.
- Keep your presentation brief and concise. Begin by stating your name and address. Identify yourself as an occupational health nurse, but avoid stating where you work or that you are a member of AAOHN unless you have specific permission to represent your employer or AAOHN at the meeting. Limit your statement to a few clear, concise points with 2 – 3 persuasive facts to help the audience understand and remember your key points.
- Practice makes perfect. Write out your presentation and rehearse. Practice saying it to your family, friends and colleagues so you are comfortable with your content and can deliver a convincing argument at the public meeting.
- Prepare a Fact Sheet. Leave written copies of your position or statement with the policy maker, staff members, the public and members of the media at the meeting.

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