



Tips for Contacting Your Legislators

Meeting With Your Legislator

Before you make an appointment to speak with your legislators, do a little homework.

Learn About Your Legislators

The more you know about the legislator who you are going to lobby, the more effective you will be in your efforts.

Where is his or her district?

- What was his or her background prior to being elected to office?
- What hobbies does he or she have?
- Is he or she a new or seasoned legislator?
- What is his or her voting record on similar and opposite issues?
- What other issues that concern you has he or she sponsored or voted for in the past?

What A Legislator Does

Legislators: introduce and/or cosponsoring legislation. They do this on their own or because a constituent asks them to. They may submit a bill for a constituent that they don't necessarily agree with. They also attend hearings, serve on committees, and campaign for re-election.

Find out what committee(s) your legislators sit on

Making an Appointment to Meet with Your Legislator

Your Massachusetts legislators have two offices: One is a district office and the other is at the Statehouse. Always telephone your legislator's office well in advance of your visit. If you are planning on visiting the Statehouse office, call well in advance to make an appointment. Don't expect to talk to your legislator without an appointment but don't turn down an appointment with an aide. Aides have access to the legislators. Legislators are rarely in their offices on Friday as the state legislature is not in session on that day. Check with their staff to find out when recesses are scheduled, make your appointment, and then arrange your trip.

If you are planning on meeting with your legislator in his or her district office, Fridays and scheduled recesses are the best time to meet with them. Some state legislators have regular district hours in the same place every week, like a library or meeting room within a town or city hall. Others rotate around the district and will publish their district hours in local newspapers. Some have evening hours as well as daytime hours. Arrive on time and don't expect to have more than about 15 or 20 minutes to meet with the legislator.

If meeting at the Statehouse, know that you may be interrupted by roll call votes or other pressing business that may pull the legislator away. If you are meeting with the legislator and a staff person, the staff person will probably stay with you if the legislator is called away. If meeting with your legislator in the district office, there will probably be a number of constituents lined up behind you.

During Your Meeting

Stay focused and on point. Be brief and to the point. Have at least two copies of any material you want to share with the legislator (one to give to him or her and one for you to use as reference as you talk). Offer to leave them if he or she wants them. Don't weight down your package of material with trivial items. Stick to a one page fact sheet

DON'T BE DISMISSIVE OF STAFF MEMBERS. If the legislator is unavailable to meet with you but a staff person who handles the issue can meet instead, go for it. The staff person is often the one with the most knowledge on an issue and usually welcomes the input of constituents or experts on the issues. Staff members often make recommendations to the legislator. Winning over the staff member is one of the best ways to win over the elected official.

DON'T ARGUE. Even if the legislator is adamantly opposed to your position, stay cool and calmly reiterate your position, showing broad based support for it.

DON'T BURN BRIDGES. Let him or her know you appreciate his or her time and consideration of your viewpoint. Don't threaten to vote him or her out of office!

Thank the legislator and/or staff person for their time and let them know you will follow through with any promised material at a later date.

After Your Meeting

- Write a thank-you note. Whether your legislator has agreed or disagreed with you or was non-committal, he or she at least took the time to listen to you. Thank him or her (and the staff person).
- Follow through with any material you promised to send.

After two weeks, call to see if the non-committed legislator has now made a decision on how to vote. Remind the staff person that you met with the legislator and are following through to see if his or her boss has made a decision.

LETTER WRITING

When there is time before a vote or hearing, writing a letter can be a very persuasive way of getting your message across to your legislator. Here are some do's and don'ts for making your letter as strong as possible.

DO send your correspondence to the correct elected official. U.S. Representatives and Senators vote on federal bills; state representatives and senators vote on state bills; and city councilors, selectmen, county supervisors, etc. vote on local bills or ordinances.

DO type or print your letter. Your elected official can't respond if she can't read your handwriting. Include your name, address, phone number and email address so they know you are a real person.

DO be specific about the issue. List the bill number and the title of the bill, if known, and what the bill addresses.

DO be brief. State your position in precise words and explain why you feel that way. Let your elected official know if you have personal expertise in, or experience with, the issue.

DO be courteous. Ask politely for your legislator's views and/or support or opposition.

DO ask that your legislator write back to you letting you know where he or she stands on the issue.

DO give credit where credit is due. If the legislator has been supportive of your issues in the past, make sure you acknowledge that support. Write him or her a thank-you letter when your legislator comes through for animals, the environment, or any other issue you care about.

DO use the correct address and salutation on your letters.

DON'T be threatening or rude. Even if you know that your legislator's stand on an issue is different from yours, be polite in explaining your point of view and in asking him or her to change his position. Threats will send your letter to the trash.

DON'T be a pen pal. Writing lengthy letters to your elected officials on a weekly basis turns you into a pest. Remember that your elected officials hear from many constituents on many issues. If you write too often, they will stop paying attention to your letters.

DON'T accept a non-answer. If your elected official writes back with a vague response or an "I'll keep your thoughts in mind if this matter comes to a vote," send the letter back, thank him or her for writing and ask for clarification about where he or she stands on the issue.

DON'T be discouraged. Remember that most meaningful legislation takes years to become law.

TELEPHONE AND E-MAIL ETIQUETTE

Sometimes you don't have time to write a letter to your elected official about your concerns because immediate action is needed. In either case, a phone call or e-mail message may be the most expedient way of getting your opinion and your message through to your representative or senator.

When Calling

When placing a call to a state legislator, you can call the legislator's office directly or use the general number of (617) 722-2000 and ask to be connected to the correct office.

BE POLITE. Staff members are assigned to handle calls from constituents and deal with dozens of callers each day. If you are polite and respectful of their time, you will find a much more sympathetic ear than if you are dismissive and rude.

BE BRIEF. Tell the person on the other end of the phone that you appreciate his/her taking your call and that you simply wanted to register your feelings on a particular issue with the elected official. You hope to have his/her support and will call again at a latter date to see what the outcome was on the vote or debate.

SAY THANK YOU. Thank the person for their time and give him or her your name, address and phone number to confirm that you are a constituent and to give your legislator's office an opportunity to get back in touch with you if needed.

When E-Mailing

Many members of the state legislature have an e-mail address. To get an updated listing of e-mail addresses for members, go to: <http://www.mass.gov/legis/>

Keep your e-mail messages short, sweet and to the point. Always use the bill number or docket number and subject of the bill. Give the pertinent facts and ask for support or opposition. Give your full address.

Checking the Status of Legislation

If you are unsure where a bill is in the legislative process, you can check its status by calling:

Massachusetts House Clerk's Office (617) 722-2356

Massachusetts Senate Clerk's Office (617) 722-1276