

Contacting Legislators

Contacting by phone

When the General Assembly is in session legislators are easy to contact at the State House. Both the House and Senate have lobby telephones which are answered by a staff which relays messages to legislators. If they are available on the floor, legislators often return calls almost immediately. If they are involved in debate or a vote, they return calls as soon as they can.

To call a Representative: 515/281-3221

To call a Senator: 515/281-3371

Email Legislators

Email is now an acceptable way to contact your legislator. First name.last name@legis.state.us
Email addresses are listed in the contact information in the Legislative Handbook.

Writing to Legislators

Some persons are apprehensive about writing letters to legislators because they are uncertain of the proper way to address them. Following are some guidelines for addressing legislators in writing.

“The Honorable,” often abbreviated to “Hon.,” is a title of respect used to address all members of state and national legislators, men and women alike, on the inside address and envelope. No other title is necessary with the full name, for example, “The Honorable John Smith.” When the first name or initial is not known, another title must be used, such as “The Honorable Mrs. Jones,” or “The Honorable Dr. Lane.”

To address a legislator or spouse, follow these examples:

“The Honorable Virginia Thompson and Mr. Thompson” or “The Honorable Brad Thompson and Mrs. (Ms.) Thompson.” When the full name is not known, the address may be “The Honorable Mr. and Mrs. Thompson.” The legislator is always listed first.

“Honorable” is never used in a salutation, but a title such as “Mr.” “Dear Senator Johnson” or “Dear Sir”/“Dear Madam” would be acceptable salutations.

Ordinary complimentary closings may be used in all forms of official correspondence, the most common being “Sincerely yours” or “Very truly yours” (more formal).

Here are a few examples:

U.S. Senator: Hon. James B. Smith
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

U.S. Representative: Hon. Donald A. Jones
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

State Legislator: Hon. John R. Doe
Senate or House Chamber
State Capitol Building
Des Moines, IA50319

Tips for Effectively Communicating with Legislators

Be sure to identify yourself each time you meet a legislator.

Legislators and their staffs meet many people during the session. They cannot be expected to remember who everyone is and it's embarrassing to put them in that position. Until you are on a first-name basis, be sure that you identify yourself, your AEA, and remind them of your special interest.

Know your legislators, their party affiliation, area of expertise, geographical area served, and committee assignments.

Take time to get to know each one from your area personally, and be aware of political ideologies. Keep a notebook on legislators' past votes and the positions taken on issues. Keep a list handy of home and office phone numbers.

Know who's got the power.

Since it is virtually impossible to become acquainted with all legislators you should concentrate on who is in leadership positions. Every legislature has a leadership structure, legislators who can dictate how others will vote and how legislation is worded. These are the people to know!

Keep track of where your legislation stands.

No legislator can keep track of the status of all proposed legislation. While you may be interested in one particular bill, the legislator cannot afford that luxury. It becomes your job to know the status and components of the bill that concerns you. You should know where that bill is at all times, sub-committee, full committee, on the calendar for debate, etc. By having this information, you are not only perceived as being knowledgeable, but also a help to the legislator and that's the name of the game.

Be brief with your appeal.

Legislators are busy people, and your case is not well served by overstaying your time or by writing too long a letter. Follow up periodically; a reminder is helpful. When talking with a legislator, NEVER give misleading facts. Once you lose credibility, you will seldom win it back.

Show your appreciation.

Legislators are human and appreciate strokes like anyone else. Commend them for a favorable vote and urge others to do so, too. Be quick to commend and slow to criticize.

Combat negativism.

Inevitably you will find a legislator who does not support your position. Don't give up. Keep the door open. Sometimes legislators change their minds when they learn more facts. Once you see their minds won't be changed, remain just as cordial as before. There may be more votes in the future, and legislators have good memories.

Contact legislators year-round.

It's very difficult to build relationships with legislators when you see them once or twice a year and only when you need their help. A quick visit or periodic phone call on their home turf can pay dividends in the end.

Personal letters should be specific and in your own words.

Letter-writing campaigns with identically worded contents are not very effective. Letters will most likely be read if the envelope is plain white and hand-written. Never use pre-printed labels.

Legislators do scan newsletters, especially eye-catching ones.

A good strategy is to group in one section articles you particularly want them to read. Do this every time, and they'll get in the habit of looking there.

That dirty word Money!

When an issue comes up and legislators are suddenly surrounded by people wanting their votes, most legislators wonder where all these suddenly concerned people were during the election. In other words, provide financial support to candidates who share your views. If you can't contribute money, contribute time to aid them in their campaigns. This, too, will be remembered.

-Wayne Haddy