

How to communicate effectively with elected officials

1. What is the most effective means of communication?

In the past, except for a face to face meeting, a written letter was the most effective means of communicating with an elected official. This still may be true if you are contacting someone on the state or local level. However, since 9-11 mail going to elected officials in Washington D. C. goes through a screening process that can delay its arrival by several weeks. Consequently, emails and phone messages are normally the most effective way to express your opinion to your elected officials.

2. Will I be able to speak directly to my elected representative? Will my representative read my email personally?

When you contact the office of an elected representative your call will be answered by a member of his staff. You will have the opportunity to voice your opinion directly to the staff member and that person will create a log of all calls for the day, what topics were covered and what position the callers took on those topics. That log is given to the representative as a report to review. A similar process is used to handle incoming emails. However, it is surprising how many emails and phone messages are actually read by the representative themselves.

Either way, your message will have an impact on how the representative deals with the topic you contacted him about. Many times, as few as 3-5 phone calls on a specific topic can change the way a legislator votes on a specific piece of legislation. While it may be difficult to get through to speak directly to an elected representative or to be sure he will read your email or letter personally there are ways for you to be sure your message is delivered. The most effective way is to speak to that individual face to face. While most of us are not able to make regular trips to our state or nation's capital, there are other opportunities. Most legislators conduct regular town hall meetings or will take appointments in their home district between legislative sessions. These meetings will often provide opportunities to speak directly with your elected representatives. Information on when your representative will be in your area is often available on his website or you can call and ask his office.

3. What should I say?

When you talk with an elected representative there are several things you should keep in mind:

a. Remember that you are talking to an individual.

Even though you are addressing someone who has been elected to a high office, they are still people and respond the same way you do to logic, courtesy, etc. You don't have to be an expert on the topic but it is good to be as informed as you can.

b. Write or speak just as you would to anyone else.

Be as detailed as you can and provide logical and statistical support for your position. Your opinion matters but facts will have an even greater impact.

c. Take a moment to think through what you want to say before you start and make sure you can be clear and concise as you present your thoughts.

Your representative is a busy person who will appreciate you not taking more time than is necessary to convey your opinion.

d. Be courteous in your communication.

Elected representatives are accustomed to receiving criticism and even personal attacks. If you speak as if you are attacking them, the representative will automatically raise his defenses and your comment will have little effect.