

A man with short dark hair and a slight smile, wearing a dark polo shirt, is holding a white rectangular sign in front of his chest. The sign has the text 'WORKING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS' written in a bold, black, hand-drawn font. The background is a plain, light color.

WORKING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

Even in these days of rampant cynicism, be assured that you can still influence the political process by contacting politicians. At the end of the day, our lawmakers work for us. We elect them to protect our rights. If enough of us stand up for what's right, we can sway votes our way.

Elected officials often make important decisions that affect our daily lives. You do not need to be a silent spectator as they make these decisions - you can play an active role by communicating your concerns and ideas.

WRITING TO YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Letters and faxes are an extremely effective way of communicating with your elected officials. Many legislators believe that a letter represents not only the position of the writer but also many other constituents who did not take the time to write.

These tips will help increase the effectiveness of your letter:

KEEP IT BRIEF:

Letters should never be longer than **one page**, and should be limited to **one issue**. Legislative aides read many letters on many issues in a day, so your letter should be as **concise** as possible.

STATE WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU WANT UP FRONT:

In the first paragraph, tell your legislators that you are a **constituent** and **identify the issue** about which you are writing. If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, it helps to **identify** it by its **bill number** (e.g. H.R. ____ or S. _____).

HIT YOUR THREE MOST IMPORTANT POINTS:

Choose the **three strongest points** that will be most effective in persuading legislators to support your position and flesh them out.

PERSONALIZE YOUR LETTER:

Tell your elected official **why this legislation matters** in her community or state. If you have one, include a **personal story** that shows how this issue affects you and your family. A constituent's personal stories can be very persuasive as your legislator shapes his or her position.

PERSONALIZE YOUR RELATIONSHIP:

Have you ever voted for this elected official? Have you ever contributed time or money to his or her campaign? Are you familiar with her through any business or personal relationship? If so, tell your elected official or his staff person. The closer your legislator feels to you, the more powerful your argument is likely to be.

YOU ARE THE EXPERT:

Remember that your legislator's job is to represent you. You should be **courteous** and **to the point**, but do not be afraid to take a **firm position**. Remember that often your elected official may know no more about a given issue than you do.

You can get the contact information for your Members of Congress at scorecard.aclu.org.

CALLING YOUR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

In addition to writing your elected representatives, you can also call them and let them know where you stand on the issues. You can contact your Members of Congress through the Capitol Switchboard (202-224-3121). Although it is unlikely that you will get to talk to the Member of Congress directly, you will be able to communicate your displeasure (or pleasure) with their policy on a given issue. The Member's staff will take note of your concern and often convey it in some form to the Member. If the Member of Congress finds that his position is unpopular and untenable, your call may contribute to a change in policy.

SAMPLE CONVERSATION:

STAFFER: Congressman Anyguy's office, how may I help you?

CALLER: Hi, my name is Jane Randomwoman from the representative's district. My mother actually helped get Anyguy his votes at the Golden Acres Retirement Home during his first election, and I've been a long time volunteer on his campaigns.

STAFFER: Thanks for your support. How can I help you today?

CALLER: Please tell the congressman to oppose the flag desecration amendment. Trust me, despite what people on Capitol Hill might be saying, everybody over here in Shady Dales is less than enthused with messing with the First Amendment.

STAFFER: I'll definitely pass on the message.

CALLER: Please also let the Congressman know that the local VFW hall told me yesterday that they didn't go to war just for a piece of cloth, they fought for the ideals for which the flag flies. They see this for what it is – an election year stunt. I know the Congressman is better than that.

STAFFER: Thanks for your concern and your call Ms. Randomwoman. I'll go mention this to my supervisor.

MEETING WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

From your local city council to your senators in Washington, meeting with your elected officials about civil liberties issues is a lot easier than most people think. Remember, your legislators work for you!

What is a lobby visit? A lobby visit is merely a meeting for you to tell your elected representative what you think about a certain issue or bill, and to try to get him or her to take action on that issue.

Where can you meet? It's not necessary to travel to Washington — every Member of Congress also has one or more offices in their congressional district. Even though the Member is not in the local office(s) very often, there is a permanent staff member at each office with whom you can meet.

REQUESTING YOUR MEETING

Make your request in writing and follow up with a call to the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler.

CLEARLY STATE YOUR INTEREST

Let them know what issue and legislation (by bill number, if you have one) you wish to discuss. Make sure they know that you are a constituent.

PREPARE FOR YOUR MEETING

Check the **ACLU website** for materials. We probably have information to help you decide on your **talking points**, as well as **materials** that you can leave with your elected official.

Decide who will attend the meeting. Bringing more than four or five people can be hard to manage.

Keep it small, but bring people who represent different groups that have **an interest in the legislation** like doctors, veterans, religious leaders, school board members, etc.

Agree on talking points. It's tough to make a strong case for your position when you are disagreeing in the meeting! If a point is causing tension in the group, leave it out.

Plan out your meeting. People can get nervous in a meeting,



and time is limited. Be sure that you lay out the meeting beforehand, including who will start the conversation.

Decide what you want achieve. What is it you want your elected official to do — vote for or against the bill? Make a commitment to introduce or co-sponsor legislation? Asking your legislator or his or her staff member to do something specific will help you know how successful your visit has been!

DURING THE MEETING

Be prompt and patient. Elected officials run on very tight schedules. Be sure to show up on time for your appointment, and be patient — it is not uncommon for legislators to be late or to have your meeting interrupted by other business.

Keep it short and focused! You will have 20 minutes or less with a staff person, and as little as 10 minutes if you meet with your elected official. Make the most of that brief time by sticking to your topic.

Bring up any personal, professional or political connections to the elected official that you may have. Start the meeting by introducing yourselves and thanking the legislator for any votes he or she has made in support of your issues, and for taking the time to meet with you.

Stick to your talking points! Stay on topic, and back them up with no more than five pages of materials that you can leave with your elected official.

Provide personal and local examples of the impact of the legislation. This is the most important thing you can do in a lobby visit.

Saying “I don’t know” can be a smart political move. You need not be an expert on the topic you are discussing. If you don’t know the answer to a question, it is fine to tell your legislator that you will get that information for him or her. This gives you the chance to put your strongest arguments into their files, and allows you to contact them again about the issue. Never make up an answer to a



question — giving wrong or inaccurate information can seriously damage your credibility!

Set deadlines for a response. Often, if an elected official hasn't taken a position on legislation, they will not commit to one in the middle of a meeting. If he or she has to think about it, or if you are meeting with a staff member, ask when you should check back in to find out what your legislator intends to do about your request. If you need to get information to your legislator, set a clear timeline for when this will happen. That way, you aren't left hanging indefinitely.

AFTER THE MEETING

Right after the meeting, compare notes with everyone in your group to understand what the elected official committed to do and what follow up information you committed to send. Each person who took part in the meeting should promptly send a personal thank you letter to the Member of Congress.

FOLLOW UP IN A TIMELY FASHION WITH ANY REQUESTED MATERIALS AND INFORMATION.

If the elected official or staff member doesn't meet the deadline for action you agreed to during the meeting, ask him or her to set another deadline. Be flexible but persistent.

SUCCESS!

In early September 2002, a small group of concerned citizens got together over Italian food in Vermont. The topic: the USA Patriot Act and how several of its provisions threaten America's freedom to read.

Around the table sat Trina Magi, past president of the Vermont Library Association and a librarian at the University of Vermont in Burlington; Peter Spitzform, also a librarian at UVM; Judith Levine, a local author, and Ben Scotch, then-head of the Vermont ACLU.

Over dinner, the four talked about how to both raise awareness and get a movement going.

They drafted a letter to Vermont's Congressional delegation and took it to the board of the Vermont Library Association, which voted unanimously to make it available for all members to sign. Levine brought the letter to the New England Booksellers Association, which also put together a letter. When the letters reached Vermont's Congressman, Bernie Sanders, he introduced the Freedom to Read Protection Act, which today boasts 145 co-sponsors in the House.

While Sander's bill has still not come to a vote, the Vermont campaign shows what dedicated activists, and a little Italian food, can accomplish.



The ACLU is our nation's leading guardian of liberty. We work daily in courts, legislatures and communities to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed to every person in this country by the Constitution and laws of the United States.

Find out more and become a member at
www.aclu.org