

# Communicate with Your Legislators



Florida has 40 Senators and 120 members of the House of Representatives. On average there are more than 2000 bills filed each session. 300-500 bills are education or education-related bills. Hundreds of people are involved in the lawmaking process in Florida. In specific, you need to communicate with your local legislator(s), make contact with them and their aides in order to advance your issues.

## Ten Tips for Calling Your Legislator

*Making a phone call to your legislator is quick, easy, and can be done at a moment's notice, making it an attractive method for legislative contact. For these same reasons, it is critical that the phone call be effective. You don't need to be an expert on the issue in order to be persuasive; you just need to give your personal perspective. Follow these ten steps for an effective call to your legislator:*

- 1. Plan:** Before you make the call, plan what you are going to **say**. Your phone call will be very brief, so keep your message simple and to-the-point. Take a moment to think about it – you might even want to make some notes—and you'll find that your call goes more smoothly than if you were to call “off the cuff”. Know your request ( for example, vote for a specific bill) in as few words as possible.
- 2. Message:** After identifying (and possibly writing down) your request, think about a **key point** or personal story that supports your position.
- 3. Call:** Make the **call**. If your legislator is in your home district on specific days or weekends, call then when they are there.
- 4. Staff or Message:** You may not be able to reach your legislator if you are calling his or her office during the legislative session. Be prepared to talk to one of the legislator's **staff** or to leave a message instead. Make sure you get the staff person's full name, and treat them with respect.
- 5. Constituent:** Begin by stating that you are a constituent. Legislators are most responsive to the people who can keep them in office – their **constituents**. If you voted for the legislator, mention that as well.
- 6. Persuade:** Get to the point. Following your plan, state the reason for the call. Try to get the legislator to state their position on the issue, and try to **persuade** them using the points you developed.
- 7. Thank:** If the legislator agrees to support your issue, **thank** them. Regardless of their position, thank the legislator for their time. Let them know that you will track the issue.

8. **Recruit:** **Recruit** a like-minded friend, family member, or colleague to make a call as well. Particularly with phone calls, quantity is critical. Legislators pay attention to issues when they believe that many of their constituents care about that issue.
9. **Report your call.** When you are part of a grassroots lobbying effort, your participation is helpful only if the people mobilizing the effort know about it. Let them know that you made the call, and report anything of import that the legislator said.
10. **Call Back:** Call more than once. Quantity is as important, if not more important, than quality in grassroots advocacy, because a high number of calls indicates to a legislator that many people in their district care about an issue. As you monitor the issue, remember to **call back** to ask for specific support or action as appropriate to the process.



### **Seven Tips for E-mailing Your Legislator**

*E-mail has changed the way that we communicate and in many ways has replaces other forms of communication, such as phone calls or handwritten letters. This technological tool is fast, cheap, and efficient. However, because it is a fast and relatively informal means of communication, many legislators view it as less credible than other methods. If you use e-mail to communicate with your legislator, you should do so in the context of an ongoing relationship in which you use other methods as the foundation of your communication.*

To craft an e-mail with impact, follow these steps:

1. **In the subject line of the message, state that you are a constituent** (For example – Subject: Message from a constituent on xyz issue). Most legislators have their staff sort and respond to their e-mails, and this strategy will increase the likelihood that your letter is read.
2. **State your request concisely.** View your message as different from an electronic letter. Again, e-mail is less formal and much briefer than traditional written communication. Craft your message accordingly – keep it tight and short.
3. **Provide personal examples and local context.** Use similar principles as those in letter writing, but in a tighter format. If you are sending a generic e-mail written by a group of which you're a part, insert personal examples in the message.
4. **Persuade a like-minded friend, family member, or colleague to send an e-mail, as well.** Again, quantity is critical. Legislators pay attention to issues when they believe that many of their constituents care about that issue. One e-mail is not convincing.
5. **Report your e-mail.** If the e-mail is initiated by an organization, ask if they want you to report your e-mail. Some groups can monitor responses electronically without your having to report, but most want you to let them know. If you persuaded a friend, let them know that that friend will be reporting as well. Make sure that your friend follows through.

- 6. Follow up.** Again, because the impact of e-mail varies widely from legislator to legislator, be sure that you are using other methods to communicate with your legislator. Follow your e-mail with a phone call, handwritten letter, or visit.
- 7. Communicate more than once.** As with all other forms of communication with your legislator, view your e-mail as part of an ongoing relationship. Keep in touch and tuned into your legislator and his or her position on the issue.



## Ten Tips for Writing Your Legislator

*Writing a letter to your legislator offers you the opportunity to give more information that you could in a phone call. It can also be an effective strategy for following up on a phone call, visit, or e-mail. The disadvantage to writing letters is you are not directly interacting with the legislator, and therefore, they do not have the opportunity to ask questions, state their position, or respond to a specific request. For these reasons, you might consider following your letter*

*with a phone call or visit for more interaction.*

- 1. Begin** by stating that you are a **constituent**. If you voted for the legislator, let them know that as well. Make sure that you write your return address on the envelope, so that the legislator's office staff knows immediately that you are a constituent.
- 2. Personalize** your letter. Research consistently shows that handwritten letters have the most impact. If you are basing your letter on a form letter, rewrite it, or at least retype it. Photocopies of generic letters are the least effective. In making your case on the issue, use personal examples.
- 3. Use the news.** Watch news stories in your local community that you can use to illustrate your point. Use a local news item as a springboard for your issue.
- 4. Local, local, local!** Make a strong connection between the issue and your local community that the legislator represents. Again, use local examples that illustrate why your issue is important and why your position is a strong one.
- 5.** If the legislator has supported your issues in the past, **acknowledge** this – but don't take it for granted that the support will continue. Give reasons why the legislator should continue or intensify his or her support.
- 6. Show restraint.** Keep your letter brief – one to one and a half pages at the most. Make sure that supporting information that you leave behind is brief as well.
- 7. Persuade** a like-minded friend, family member, or colleague to write a letter as well. Again, quantity is critical. Legislators pay attention to issues when they believe that many of their constituents care about that issue.

8. **Report** your letter. When you are part of a grassroots lobbying effort, your participation is helpful only if the people mobilizing the effort know about it. Let them know that you wrote the letter, and what you intend to do to follow up.
9. **Follow up.** In the letter, ask your legislator for a response. To get a better picture of your legislator's position, consider following your letter with a phone call or visit.
10. **Communicate** more than once. Again, quantity is as important, if not more important, than quality in grassroots advocacy. One letter will not gain influence. As you monitor the issue, communicate with the legislator through phone calls, additional letters, e-mail, or visits to ask for specific support or action as appropriate to the process.



### **Tips for Meeting Your Legislator**

*A face-to-face meeting with your legislator can be a powerful opportunity to advance your agenda. The meeting can also position you as a reliable expert on your issue and an important ally for your legislator... if it's done right. Follow these steps for a successful visit:*

1. **Plan your meeting.** Decide whether you are going alone, or with a group of constituents. If you go as a group, decide who is going to lead the meeting, and what each person is going to contribute to the discussion. This will help eliminate awkward silences or repetitive messages, and will ensure that you hit all the key points you want to cover. You will likely have only 15 or 20 minutes for your meeting, so plan accordingly.
2. **Know your audience.** Do a little research about your legislator if you don't know much about him or her. Find out his or her positions on the issues you're focusing on.
3. **If there are multiple issues that are important to you, select one that you will discuss for that meeting.** Attempting to persuade a legislator on multiple issues not only weakens your position as a reliable, focused constituent, but it dilutes your impact on each issue.
4. **Define your message.** Focus your comments on one issue. Then, rather than trying to say everything you know or think about that issue, plan two or three observations or arguments that get at the heart of your position.
5. **Make an appointment....**but don't be surprised if it changes. Legislators often have last-minute hearings or committee meetings. Be flexible.
6. **Meet in your home district.** Meetings in the home district are often less hurried than meetings at the capitol, and they provide the "home turf" advantage. Find out when your legislator is in his or her home district, and schedule your appointment then, or if your workplace illustrates your position, invite them to visit you. If this is not possible, travel to the capitol as an alternative.
7. **Once you're in the door, try to begin by finding something personal that you have in common with the legislator.** Do they live on the street where your mother grew up? Are

their kids in your child's class at school? Does something in their office suggest an interest that your share, such as fishing, sports, or art? Engage in a little "small talk" to break the ice – but keep it brief.

- 8. State the reason for your visit.** Be clear about why you are there, why they should be interested (remember to mention again that you're a constituent, and use local examples), and what you want them to do.
- 9. State your case – Bring it to Life/Tell a story.** Make your case as personally as possible. Remember you are there to put a human face on the issue. For example, if you are talking about what you spend out of pocket consider bringing the receipts – that brings the issue to life.
- 10. Invite comments and questions.** Engage your legislator in dialogue. Don't worry if they ask you something you don't know the answer to – simply tell them you don't know, but that you'll find out for them.
- 11. State only what you know.** Don't overstate your case, fudge the facts, or guess. Again, keep it focused on your story.
- 12. Ask for a commitment.** If you don't ask your legislator for action, you won't see any. If they decline, encourage them to think about it, and let them know you'll keep in touch.
- 13. Have a leave-behind.** Provide your legislator with brief, written information for further reflection. Make sure it contains the local angle for your district.
- 14. Report on your visit.** As soon as possible after your visit (in the hallway is ideal), jot down notes that record the tone, what was said, and what question were asked in the meeting. Not only will this help in reporting on your visit, but it will help you build a record of your relationship with your legislator that can inform future dialogue. Let your group know that you made the visit, and report what you covered and what the legislator said. If possible, provide them with a copy of your leave-behind materials as well.
- 15. Follow up.** Send a handwritten thank-you note to your legislator. Let them know that you appreciate their time. If you promised to get them additional information, provide it or let them know how and when they can expect to receive it.