

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY
Communicating with Elected Officials



Things to “Do”:

- Sign the guest book.
- Ask to speak with the staff person working on education and/or mental health issues.
- Be professional, courteous, positive, direct, clear, concise, factual, credible, and specific.
- Leave behind your business card, fact sheets, or testimony. Be sure they include how you can be reached.
- Try to establish a relationship of mutual trust with your legislator. Use the “Golden Rule.”
- Be reasonable; remember everyone thinks his/her issue is the most important one being considered.
- Keep it simple; avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Thank legislators for meeting with you and for their consideration, even if your comments are not well received.
- Follow up visits with a letter to the staffer and/or the legislator with an offer to be of assistance in the future.
- Always follow up with information/research you have promised to provide.
- **BIGGEST DO: Speak from your heart, tell your story; use anecdotes from your community. For example...**
 - Have you had to turn away referrals and/or turn down or stop seeing a patient who was a Medicaid beneficiary?
 - As a school counselor, do you shuttle between two or more schools, or deal with an unreasonably high student caseload?
 - Do you know of students, children, or family friends with mental, emotional, or substance-use related problems interfering with their learning or ability to hold a job?
 - Have the recent Medicaid rate and reimbursement rate reductions had an impact on your practice?

Things to Avoid:

- Don't give inaccurate information or purposely lie.
- Don't get sidetracked or go off message.
- Don't get defensive or badmouth the other side.
- Don't get upset if you can't meet with your Representative or Senator.
- Don't send form letters or emails.
- Don't be argumentative or abrasive.
- Don't cover more than one subject, unless asked.
- Don't write a letter longer than one page.
- Don't give up.
- **BIGGEST DON'T:** Don't forget to follow-up with the information you promised.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY Working With Your Elected Officials



Most elected officials share some common characteristics that make the outcome of advocacy efforts more predictable. Knowing these characteristics, and how to take advantage of them, can dramatically improve your chances for success.

Elected Officials like to be asked for help.

Most elected officials focus on issues they deem important to their constituents. As a result, they have to be made aware of the problem, given background information on the issue, provided with suggestions for solutions, and asked for their help in solving it.

Elected Officials do not know everything.

Most politicians are intelligent and as they serve in public office over time, become experts in particular fields. However, elected officials are also asked to cast votes on a variety of issues, many of which they know little about. A good politician, therefore, is always open to good information. Once a reliable source is found, they will most likely cultivate it. Be that source for your elected officials.

Elected Officials have many demands on their time.

Politicians almost always have more to do than they can get done. As such, never waste a politician's time; do not overload your elected representative with demands, but work to make their job easier; and always, frame your issue as important and achievable.

Elected Officials have few resources.

In Idaho, elected representatives are expected to cover broad issues with a small staff. This is why at the state level, good information, trusted informants, and other outside resources are considered very precious. The more that you can do to assist those individuals whom you have asked to represent your issue, the better.

Elected Officials are always running for office.

Elected officials have two very different jobs: running for office, and making policy while in office. Politicians are very responsive to their constituents, so try to visit a politician in the company of at least one voting constituent (a person from their home district).

Elected Officials like getting to know constituents.

It is a fact of life that few politicians turn down access to an audience of voting constituents. You may want to arrange a "reception" or a legislative breakfast so your whole chapter/division can meet and get to know your elected officials. Also, make visits to their district and capitol offices. It is a great way to get acquainted!

Elected Officials like to be thanked.

Everyone likes to be thanked for a job well done. You should always express your gratitude when an official has helped you, even if they were unable to achieve the desired result. A "thank you" is long remembered, especially if put in writing.