



"In every country where I have seen real progress in maternity care, it was women's groups working together with midwives that made the difference."

- Marsden Wagner, MD, MSPH

Communicating with Legislators: A "How-To" Guide

Introduction

Whether or not you actually voted for your Representative or Senator, you are their constituent and their job is to represent YOU! As a constituent you have every right to let them know what you want them to do on any issue or bill. You do not have to be an expert or have lots of information on the situation. All you have to do is tell them what you want them to do.

Communicating with your legislator is very important and can be critical at specific points in the legislative process. You can make an appointment to visit them, you can call them on the phone, you can e-mail them, or you can write (and FAX) to them.

This information sheet includes a brief overview of the legislative process in general, tips on communicating with your legislators, and some sample letters.

Don't know which Representative or Senator is yours? Call your local Elections Board to find out your district numbers and names of your state Representative and Senator. Look in your phone book or at your public library, or on the internet (search for your state's Secretary of State website or for an official state government website) for phone numbers and mailing addresses at the State Capitol.

Basics of the Legislative Process

(Process and terminology may vary slightly from state to state)

1. Sponsored: A Representative or Senator decides to sponsor the bill, usually with co-sponsors.
2. Introduced: The sponsor introduces the bill on the floor, and the bill is given a number.
3. To Committee: The bill is assigned to a committee; a subcommittee hears, may amend, and votes to hold or to recommend the bill, then the full committee hears, may amend, and can then vote the bill out of committee or table it (which means the bill is dead for that session). The Committee chair can also decide to do nothing with the bill, in which case it is "dead."
4. To the floor: If voted out of committee, the bill goes to the floor for a vote, or may be required also to go through Rules Committee before it can get onto the agenda for a floor vote.
5. Floor Vote: The bill may be amended on the floor, may be passed or killed.

6. In the other chamber: The bill may simultaneously go through the equivalent process in the other chamber, or may automatically proceed to the other chamber after passage in the first one.
7. Reconciled: If different versions are passed in the House and Senate, the bill goes to a Conference Committee (made of equal numbers of Representative and Senators) which can change the bill however it sees fit. Their version goes back to both chambers for ye or nay votes as is; no floor amendments allowed.
8. Governor's Signature: The final version of the bill as passed by both chambers must be signed by the governor to become law.
9. Lifespan: Each legislative session starts with a clean slate; bills not voted on in the previous session must be reintroduced to be active.

Tips on Communicating with Legislators - General, Written, and Phone Calls

1. Handwritten preferred.
2. Keep it short; one page maximum for a letter.
3. Identify yourself (include your name and address) as a constituent.
4. Refer to a bill by its name and call number (example: "State Midwifery Act" HB 315).
5. Personalize your letter. Put it in your own words, include a sentence or two about your personal experience with the issue, or a sentence or two about the local impact of the legislation in question.
6. Clearly tell the legislator what you want her/him to do ("please vote in favor of HB 315").
7. Be sure to sign your letter!
8. Mail or FAX your letter right away.
9. A postcard is quick and effective. Identify yourself and the bill, say what you want your legislator to do, and mail it!
10. ALWAYS THANK THE LEGISLATOR FOR HER/HIS ATTENTION, ETC.!

Address your letters properly:

The Honorable (Senator's name) or The Honorable (Representative's Name).

Address (at the state capitol).

Dear Senator (Name) or Dear Representative (Name).

Tips on phone calls:

1. Prepare - plan what you want to say, and have the bill number and name at hand.

2. Always identify yourself by name and as a constituent.

3. Be courteous and friendly (remember the Golden Rule).

4. You will reach a secretary or aide (be nice! These people can be very helpful!). You can:

Ask your legislator to return your call, OR

Tell the aide or secretary what you want the legislator to do. ALWAYS SAY THANK YOU!

5. If you speak to the legislator directly:

Identify yourself by name and as a constituent.

Identify the bill you are calling about.

Tell her/him what you want them to do.

ALWAYS THANK THE LEGISLATOR for taking the time to speak with you.

Additional possibilities - generally not for last-minute calls:

You can ask them what they think of the bill, or how they plan to vote on it - then LISTEN! (You may learn something, and politicians like everyone else like to be heard!).

Ask what they need to make up their mind. You can offer to get them additional information.

If you don't like their position, ask courteously what might persuade them to change their mind. If they ask you tough questions or bring up issues you are not prepared to address, say "I can't answer that one, but I will find out and get information to you." If you have such a conversation, try to contact the group or organization working on the legislation from your point of view so they know and can follow up.

Citizens for Midwifery
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