

## **Legislative Advocacy**

### **Why?**

Legislative advocacy is basically communication with your legislator. It is often done on behalf of others, many times for those who have no voice and cannot speak for themselves- the poor and indigent, prisoners on death row, the unborn, etc.

### **How?**

There are four main ways that you can communicate with your legislator(s) effectively: writing, calling, visiting the office, and using the media.

Writing: You can write your representative by letter (either group or individual), by e-mail, or by fax. With all three options the keys for effective communication are the same:

- Be brief, clear, and polite.
- If letter is handwritten, be legible.
- Include your name and address and any other relevant personal information.
- Limit your message to one basic issue area.
- Ask for specific action, i.e. a vote on a bill, co-sponsoring legislation.
- Ask for a response.
- Express appreciation for past efforts, if possible.
- Always include relevant personal experience.

Calling: To reach the Washington, D.C. office of any U.S. Senator or Representative, call the Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask for your representative's office. If long distance calls are a concern, you can also call the state/district office of your representative. Consult your local phone book or call directory assistance to obtain the number. Remember the keys to effective phone calls:

- Identify yourself to the receptionist and inform him/her that you would like to speak with the appropriate staff person about your concern.
- If you speak with a legislative aide, be sure to write down his/her name for future reference.
- Address only one topic.
- Be prepared to articulate your position on the issue of concern to you.
- Ask your legislator's position on the issue of concern to you.
- Anticipate possible responses, so you can be prepared to ask follow-up questions
- If the person cannot give you an immediate response, ask him/her to call your back at the earliest convenience. If you do not hear from them in a reasonable amount of time, do a follow-up call.

Visiting: Remember that visits are a very effective form of advocacy, and are often done by a group of constituents. The keys to an effective visit are:

- Your group should plan to meet prior to the visit.
- Identify the most important things you want to convey, as you may end up with less time than you anticipated.
- Appoint a spokesperson who is responsible for making the group's specific request(s).
- Appoint a moderator who will ensure that no one side monopolizes the discussion.
- Have each member of the group introduce him/herself.
- Be polite and respectful, but don't be afraid to express disagreement.

- If the legislator requests information regarding your issue, be sure to follow-up as soon as possible after the visit.
- If you cannot get an answer during your visit, be clear about when you can expect a response and how the group will remain in contact.

Using the Media: The media, although indirect, is a very important way to contact your legislator, as most legislators have their staffs clip the relevant articles and opinion pieces from the daily newspapers, both national and local. The two main avenues open to ordinary citizens in the media are the Op/Ed and Letters to the Editor sections of the daily newspapers. The keys for effectively completing both remain the same:

- Remember that the timing of your article is important
- Mention one of the paper's recent editorials, news stories, or photos.
- When applicable, highlight comments or actions taken by elected officials.
- Try to give your letter a local slant and, if possible, articulate your experience.
- Try to keep the letter's tone reasonable and lively at the same time.