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# ALA Office for Library Advocacy

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## Working with Legislators & Decision-makers: Tips for Success

### WORKING WITH LEGISLATORS

The more you know about a legislator or official, the more effective you can be in communicating the library message and ensuring a successful outcome from your advocacy efforts.

Some legislators are more important than others because they control more votes, sit on important committees, are members of the governing body's power structure or leadership or are considered experts in a particular area. When deciding which legislators to approach, always ask yourself who can make or break this piece of legislation.

Policymakers who hold appointments on critical committees should be targeted first. After all, if your bill doesn't make it out of committee, it will never be voted on.

Committees that often consider issues that affect libraries include:

- Ways and Means
- Appropriations
- Education
- Urban Affairs
- Judicial
- Commerce.

There are many ways to communicate with legislators. Some make it easy by providing a link on their Web sites. Most prefer letters and/or visits. Remember, timing is everything. Make sure you know the legislative cycles for various governing bodies. The sooner you voice your concerns the better. ALA and many state associations issue action alerts on key issues.

## VISITS

Face-to face discussion is the most effective means of communication and helps to establish a solid working relationship. While politicians have demanding schedules, they generally welcome opportunities to stay in touch with their constituents. Visits to district offices may be easier—and more relaxing—for both advocates and legislators. It's better if citizen advocates outnumber staff.

- **Know your legislator.** Fill out the pocket checklist provided and review it before making contacts.
- **Know when is the best time to time to schedule visits.** Timing is everything. All legislative bodies have their own cycles. Make a point of knowing when the legislature meets, when key committee hearings are held, when bills are marked up, when debate is scheduled, when recess is scheduled. Time your visit accordingly.
- **Know who to bring.** Delegates should be constituents, and citizen advocates should outnumber staff. Keep the delegation small enough for an easy exchange of views.
- **Know how to make your case.** Make sure everyone understands and agrees on grounds rules before the visit. Choose a spokesperson who will lead the discussion, cover the main points and keep the conversation focused. Not everyone needs to speak to make a contribution. Be prepared to answer hard questions.
- **Know why you're there.** Have a clear agenda. Tell the legislator what specific legislation you want him or her to support. Legislators can't keep track of all pending legislation. Make it easy for them to help you.
- **Know what you don't know.** Practice your presentation with at least one person who is unfamiliar with your issues. They may point out inconsistencies or ask questions that you've overlooked. Edit your presentation accordingly.
- **Know what to bring.** Bring a policy statement or fact sheets that support your position. Keep paper to a minimum—one page is best.

## LETTERS

Letters are a simple and powerful way to let a legislator know how you feel. Legislators pay attention because letters represent votes. And each letter is deemed to represent several likeminded citizens. Your letter may be formal or informal, typed or handwritten.

- Be sure to identify yourself as a constituent and include your contact information.
- Use the correct form of address.
- Write from your own experience. A personalized letter carries more weight than a form letter.
- Limit yourself to two or three paragraphs—no more than a page.

## TELEPHONE CALLS

Telephone calls are appropriate and easy, especially if there is a vote pending. When should you call? Call to ask support before a hearing or floor vote, to ask for help with legislative colleagues or to convey urgent concerns.

- Start by identifying yourself, where you live and why you are calling.
- Write down your key points.
- Again, be brief and express thanks.
- Write down when you called, whom you spoke with and the outcome of the call for follow up and a thank you note.
- Encourage others to call.

Whether you do it in person, by phone, email or letter, communication is necessary for good relations with public officials—not just when your library’s funding comes up for a vote, but on a regular basis so the lawmaker can become familiar with library issues and trends. Here are some tips to keep in mind when reaching out to lawmakers.

- **Support legislators you know support libraries.** Keep them informed as your issue or legislation moves forward. Contribute to their campaigns. Volunteer behind the scenes. Vote for them!
- **Recognize** that public officials can’t be experts on everything. Be prepared to provide them with information or referral sources.
- **Stick to one issue.** Decision makers do not want to listen to a laundry list of issues.
- **Do your homework.** Find out what you can about an official, what committees he/she serves on, what issues are of particular interest. Link the library message to something that addresses a key concern.
- **Keep a list of names** with background and contact information handy for quick action.
- **Meet with legislators.** Legislators are more likely to believe and trust you if they feel they know you. Attend state and national legislative days. Or, make an appointment to go to their home offices.
- **Get to know staff.** Legislative staff members can be very powerful. If convinced about your issue, they can become important allies. Staff members change frequently. Be sure to stay current. Offer to brief new staff on library issues. Thank them for their assistance.
- **Have a clear message and request for action** (e.g., vote for/against a particular measure, persuade other committee members to support your side).
- **Keep them informed of both concerns—and successes.** Send copies of the library’s newsletter, editorials, articles and other relevant items.
- **Always be courteous and thank them,** even if you don’t agree.
- **Develop relationships** with federal, state and local lawmakers. A growing number of federal policy issues have a direct impact on libraries and their users.
- **Don’t give misinformation.** If you don’t know the answer or have the information at your fingertips, promise to get back to the lawmaker as soon as possible.
- **Be personal.** Share your own real-world stories about your library.

- **Seal the deal.** Be direct about what you want and try to get a commitment.
- **Aim for at least one visit from each legislator a year.**

## WORKING WITH DECISION-MAKERS

- **Maintain a current list/database of decision-makers,** the committees they serve on, their personal and professional background, issues of special concern, their key staff and contact information.
- **Use your contacts.** Do you have board members, Friends, users or neighbors who have influence with key officials? Ask them if they would be willing to support your case.
- **Start sooner rather than later.** Make it a point to get library concerns included in forums for candidates. Provide each candidate with a packet of information about the library.
- **Send letters of congratulations to winning candidates and an invitation** to visit the library or media center.
- **Make it easy for them to support you.** Keep your visits/presentations brief and to the point. Provide a one-page briefing sheet with a clear statement of the action you are seeking, and key facts. Include contact information for additional information.
- **Stay in touch.** Schedule regular visits, call or drop by to chat, if that is an option. Send your newsletter, annual report and articles of interest.
- **Get them into the library at least once during the year.** Invite them for coffee, to speak or attend special events. Make sure they are introduced. Alert the media, and take pictures to display in the library. Include their photo in the library's newsletter.
- **Make sure they know about your successes.** Send news clippings, copies of noteworthy thank you letters and other items that reflect well on the library's contributions.
- **Invite the county board, school board or board of regents to meet at your library.** Provide refreshments and a tour before the meeting.
- **Make it clear that you share their commitment** to quality education, economic development, literacy or other key issues.
- **Provide information packets on topics that may help their decision-making,** not just about the library, but other aspects as well.
- **Support those who support you.** If a parent board is endorsing a particular piece of legislation, send a letter or have your Friends group send letters of support and forward copies to the board.
- **Thank them.** In person, in writing—and in public—whenever possible.