



# A Legislative Advocacy Guide for Members

## PART I: THE BASICS

### Reasons for Getting Involved in Legislative Advocacy

- While ALA is the official voice of libraries and librarians, individual members have a responsibility to promote the interests of the library profession and to speak on behalf of their library patrons.
- Even though librarians are respected members of the community, the competition for the attention and time of elected officials is great, as is the competition for federal funding. Every year thousands of associations and interest groups converge on Washington DC to compete for Congress' attention and federal funds. Some well-known groups like oil and tobacco can afford to pay for powerful lobbyists, but ALA is not in a position to do that. As such, we rely on our members to help ensure that the needs and interests of libraries, librarians and library users are adequately addressed by Congress.

### Keeping Track of Current Legislative Issues

- From the ALA homepage ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)) click on the "Take Action button." This page provides you with brief information about top federal issues affecting libraries. From here, you can also find out who your elected officials are. To begin, just type in your zip code into the text box.
- Go to [www.ala.org/washoff](http://www.ala.org/washoff). This is the homepage of ALA Washington Office. They provide information about federal legislation that affects libraries.
- Check out the ALA Washington Office's blog, District Dispatch, at <http://www.wo.ala.org/districtdispatch/>
- Subscribe to ALAWON. This is an announcement service that the ALA Washington Office uses to send out timely information about issues and legislation. To subscribe:
  - Go to [lists.ala.org](http://lists.ala.org)
  - Enter "ala-wo" in the Search lists box; or click view all lists, and search for ala-wo@ala.org
  - Click ala-wo@ala.org
  - Click Subscribe
  - Enter your email address and click Submit. A welcome message with your password will be sent to you.
- Check the category called "Legislation" on YALSA's blog at <http://yalsa.ala.org/blog>

### Taking Action

- Each year the ALA Washington Office organizes a national Library Legislative Day where librarians converge on the Capitol to advocate for library issues. It is also

possible to participate virtually in Library Legislative Day if you can't make the trip to DC. In 2009, Library Legislative Day will be held on May 11 & 12. To learn more go to:

[www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/wo/washevents/nlld/nlld2009.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/wo/washevents/nlld/nlld2009.cfm)

- Volunteer to serve on YALSA's Legislation Committee. Learn more at [www.ala.org/yalsa](http://www.ala.org/yalsa) (click on "Governance" from the left menu)
- Find out if your state library association has a Library Legislative Day in your state capital or if they have a Legislation Committee
- Take action when ALA or YALSA send out requests via email.
- Keep your local elected officials informed about issues that affect your library and its patrons.
- Visit the ALA Advocacy Resource Center at [www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/index.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/index.cfm). From here, you can view advocacy tools, resources and publications, learn about legislative issues, funding issues and/or subscribe to electronic discussion lists.

### **Finding Out Who Your Elected Officials Are**

- Go to [www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org). From here you can find out who your federal, state and local officials are. To begin, type your zip code into the text box on the left.

### **Getting in Touch with Members of Congress**

- By Phone: use the Capitol Switchboard, 202-224-3121. From here you can get connected to the offices of your Representative in the House and/or Senators.
- You can get fax, email, phone and snail mail addresses by going to [www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org).
- Click on the "Take Action" button on the ALA homepage.

### **Communicating with Elected Officials**

- If time permits, make your communication as personal as possible. A well thought out, personal letter has more impact than a form letter or form email.
- Method of communication: The best methods, especially if timing is critical, are phone calls or faxes to the official's office.
  - All snail mail is irradiated at a location off site, so there is often a significant lag between when you send a letter and when it is received. Additionally, the irradiation can make the letter brittle and/or hard to read.
  - Emails are ok, but know that some officials have spam-blocking software that could prevent your message from being received. Also, some officials only allow email via an online form on their web site.
- If contacting the official by phone, do not expect to speak with him/her. Only staffers answer the phones, but do not be put off by this. Their job is to take messages and tally how many calls are received and the topic of the calls.
- When communicating in writing, address the official as "The Honorable Firstname Lastname." For example: "The Honorable Hilary Clinton."
- Always identify yourself.
- Be concise, specific, and support your views with facts when possible.

- Be polite and respectful.
- Stay on message and keep to your main points.
- Always be sure to thank them for their time.

These tips on communicating with elected officials are adapted from the American Institute of Architects' document "How To Lobby Elected Officials—A Guide for AIA Members," at:  
[www.aia.org/SiteObjects/files/howtobby.pdf](http://www.aia.org/SiteObjects/files/howtobby.pdf)

## **PART II: MEETING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS**

Meeting face-to-face with elected officials can provide a very effective and valuable opportunity to voice your concerns and share your views about a legislative issue. Not surprisingly, there are a number of ways that you can make a success – or a failure – out of a meeting.

Keep in mind that you don't necessarily need to travel far for a meeting.

Congresspersons are in their home states for part of the year, and state legislators spend part of the year home in their districts. To find out when they're available visit [www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org) or your state legislature's web site and find out what days they're in session (when they're not, that's when you can schedule to visit with them locally).

### **1. Always make an appointment in advance – don't just show up**

Legislators have numerous demands on their time. Call ahead to schedule an appointment, and be flexible about when you'll meet. Keep in mind that legislators' schedules can fill up quickly; try to give yourself as much lead-time as you can.

When calling to schedule an appointment, identify yourself as a constituent and clearly state the purpose of the meeting. The following script may help as you make this call:

"Hi! I'm \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_. I'll be in (your state/capital/city) on (date), and would like to schedule an appointment to meet with (Governor/Senator/Assemblyperson or Representative \_\_\_\_\_) to discuss proposed legislation that would impact young adults' use of technology and the Internet in schools and libraries. I would be more than happy to meet with the legislative assistant familiar with H.R. 5319 if the (elected official) is unavailable. Is someone available the afternoon of the (date of visit)? If no one is available, I would like to drop by the office to leave information for the (elected official) to review."

Important: Don't just show up to a legislator's office. Chances are you won't get to meet with the official and at best you won't have the time and attention you need to express your views. At worst, you may not be remembered the way you wanted.

### **2. Research Your Legislator**

Know his/her history, especially any positions they may have taken on the issue you wish to discuss with him/her.

- To research his/her voting record, position statements, ratings from special interest groups and other pertinent information, go to:  
[www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org)

### **3. Prepare a concise statement for your meeting.**

It's essential that you are prepared to get your point across succinctly and effectively – you won't have more than 15-20 minutes to speak with your legislator.

- Write down key points you plan to highlight.
- Discuss how the issue impacts the young adults with whom you work on a personal level.
- Be familiar with opposing arguments and be prepared to defend your position with facts.
- Include local data and anecdotes about how the people in your community are affected by the issue.
- Conclude by providing your elected official with a proposed solution to the issue and ask him/her to take a particular action.
- Do not use library jargon or acronyms and be sure to define terms, such as "information literacy," that the legislator may not be familiar with. It is highly probable that the legislator has not been in a library since his or her college days. This presents a challenge for you: you'll need to paint a picture of what a modern library is like without overloading them with technical terms (e.g. subscription databases).

### **4. Bring written materials with you**

Leave your elected official with resources that provide quick reference or support to the points you discussed. A brief fact sheet, position papers or other resources, along with information about your organization, is helpful.

### **5. Be on time & be flexible with your time**

Don't be late, even by just a few minutes – it may mean you miss your meeting entirely. If you think you may be delayed, be sure to call ahead and let them know. In addition, be flexible during your meeting. Interruptions can occur, and you may need to communicate your views while walking with your elected official to another meeting.

### **6. Dress professionally**

Wear business attire to the meeting. Don't wear anything loud, such as large jewelry or a necktie with a cartoon character, that could distract the official from what you have to say. If you're unsure about an accessory or item of clothing, err on the side of caution.

### **7. Be prepared to meet with a staff person, if your elected official is unable to make your appointment**

It's not uncommon for a schedule change at the last minute. Don't be disappointed if you end up meeting with a staff aide. Key staff aides are sometimes just as

familiar – if not more – on policy or proposed legislation. Make the most of your time with them; they, in turn, will communicate your views to your elected official, often at the most opportune time.

### **8. Be professional and diplomatic**

Present your case in a straightforward, friendly, and professional manner. Never argue about an issue with your elected official – rather, show him/her respect and try to find common ground from the very start, and use that bond to express your views. If it appears you will need to “agree to disagree”, follow up with a letter explaining your views more comprehensively, thanking him/her for the meeting.

### **9. Listen Carefully**

Politicians tend to speak generally, avoid the issues and/or go off on tangents. Try to draw out specific answers to your questions and/or look for topics to connect your point of view with. If the official asks you a question that you do not know the answer to, let him/her know that you will find the answer and get back to him/her.

### **10. Put the issue in human terms**

Let your elected official know how the policy or proposed legislation will impact the young adults you serve every day. Use short but effective anecdotes to support. Help your legislator understand how this piece of legislation will affect the real people he/she represents.

### **11. Bring a well-spoken teen or parent**

When a teen or parent speaks about the same issues that concern you, it sends a message to the official that this issue is one that a large part of the community is concerned with, and not just something limited to librarianship. Also, nothing tugs at the heartstrings of a legislator like a cute kid.

### **12. Be Inclusive**

We speak on behalf of youth because we want them to have access and opportunities that will help them achieve, succeed and grow into competent caring members (and voters) of our community. This is a point where, most likely, you and your elected official can see eye-to-eye. Finding common ground, then demonstrating how this legislation is counter-productive to those efforts, respects the motivations and the emotions that drive a piece of legislation. Keep the focus on fostering an environment where young adults have the resources they need to thrive.

### **13. Always Have an "Ask"**

You're not just there to inform the legislator about a particular issue. You want that person to take a certain position, vote a certain way, sponsor or support a particular bill, etc. After you make your points about the issue, make a request of the legislator. You can sum up by saying something like:

- "therefore I'm respectfully asking that you cast your vote against the proposed bill H.R. 5319"
- "because teen literacy is such an important issue, I hope you will sign the letter that's currently circulating among Senators that is calling for raising the funding for the Improving Literacy Through School Libraries Program."

### **14. Volunteer to serve as a contact for this issue in the future**

Legislators will often call on individuals they see as knowledgeable on a specific issue or policy topic. Make them aware of your area of expertise and provide contact information so they can call on you in the future. Leave business cards with the legislator and his or her staffer.

### **15. Give the Official an Open Invitation to Visit Your Library**

Politicians love a photo-op, especially during an election year. What could be better press for him or her than a photo of them reading to kids, helping teens with homework, giving out the summer reading award to the winning teen, etc.? Once they're in your library, take advantage of the opportunity to educate them about library services to teens.

### **16. Say Thank You**

Be sure to send a thank you note promptly after your meeting. This offers another opportunity to restate your views, send any additional information or request action on the issue. If you met with a staff aide, be sure to send a separate letter to your legislator.

### **17. Don't be Jack Abramoff**

Never offer an elected official anything in return for their support, and never discuss campaign finances, PAC contributions or endorsements.

These tips on meeting with elected officials is adapted, with permission, from the "Teacher Leader's Network's Tips for a Successful Meeting with Your Elected Officials," accessed on July 26, 2006, at: [www.teacherleaders.org/Resources/talkingtips.html](http://www.teacherleaders.org/Resources/talkingtips.html)

## **PART III: LEARN MORE, DO MORE**

This guide from YALSA is just a first step. ALA has an action kit called "Stand Up and Speak Out for Libraries," online at:

[www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/ola/actionkit/home.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/ola/actionkit/home.cfm). Use this for more detailed information on how to reach out to your legislators, launch an advocacy campaign in your community, spread your message via the media and more.