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Communicating With Congress

Tips on Telephoning Your Elected Representatives

To find your Senators' and Representative's phone numbers, you may call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202)224-3121 and ask for your Senators' and/or Representative's office.

Remember that telephone calls are usually taken by a staff member, not the Member of Congress. Ask to speak with the aide who handles the issue about which you wish to comment.

After identifying yourself and your company/industry, tell the aide you would like to leave a brief message, such as: "Please tell Senator/Representative (Name) that I support/oppose (S.___/H.R.___)."

You will also want to state reasons for your support or opposition to the bill. Ask for your Senators' or Representative's position on the bill. You may also request a written response to your telephone call.

Tips on Writing Congress

The letter is the most popular choice of communication with a congressional office. With the heightened security around Washington, DC, you should fax the letter to the offices instead of mailing it. If you decide to write and fax a letter, this list of helpful suggestions will improve the effectiveness of the letter:

1. Your purpose for writing should be stated in the first paragraph of the letter. If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly, e.g., House bill: H. R. _____, Senate bill: S._____.
2. Be courteous, to the point, and include key information, using examples to support your position.
3. Personalize your letter. Write about your industry and how this issue will affect it.
4. Address only one issue in each letter; and, if possible, keep the letter to one page.

Addressing Correspondence:

To a Senator: The Honorable (full name)
 (Rm.#)__(name of)Senate Office Building
 United States Senate
 Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

To a Representative: The Honorable (full name)
(Rm.#)__(name of)House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

Note: When writing to the Chair of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, it is proper to address them as:

Dear Mr. Chairman or Madam Chairwoman:

Dear Madam Speaker or Mr. Speaker:

Tips on E-mailing Congress

Generally, the same guidelines apply as with writing letters to Congress. You may find and e-mail your senators and representative directly from their websites if they have this feature.

Suggestions for a Personal Visit

Meeting with a Member of Congress or Congressional staff is a very effective way to convey a message about a specific legislative issue. Below are some suggestions to consider when planning a visit to a Congressional office.

Plan Your Visit Carefully:

Be clear about what it is you want to achieve; determine in advance which person you need to meet with to achieve your purpose.

Make an Appointment:

When attempting to meet with a Member, contact the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler. Explain your purpose and who you represent. It is easier for Congressional staff to arrange a meeting if they know what you wish to discuss and your relationship to the area or interests represented by the Member.

Be Prompt and Patient:

When it is time to meet with a Member, be punctual and be patient. It is not uncommon for a Congressman or Congresswoman to be late, or to have a meeting interrupted, due to the Member's crowded schedule. If interruptions do occur, be flexible. When the opportunity presents itself, continue your meeting with a Member's staff.

Be Prepared:

Whenever possible, bring brief information and materials supporting your position to the meeting. Members are required to take positions on many different issues. In some instances, a Member may lack important details about the pros and cons of a particular matter. It is therefore helpful to share with the Member information and examples that demonstrate clearly the impact or benefits associated with a particular issue or piece of legislation.

Be Political:

Members of Congress want to represent the best interests of their district or state. Wherever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the Member's constituency. If possible, describe for the Member how you or your group can be of assistance to him/her. Where it is appropriate, remember to ask for a commitment.

Be Responsive:

Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information, in the event the Member expresses interest or asks questions. Follow up the meeting with a thank you letter that outlines the different points covered during the meeting, and send along any additional information and materials requested.

Congressional Staff Roles

Each Member of Congress has staff to assist him/her during a term in office. To be most effective in communicating with Congress, it is helpful to know the titles and principal functions of key staff.

Commonly Used Titles:

- **Administrative Assistant (AA) or Chief of Staff (CoS):**
The Administrative Assistant reports directly to the Member of Congress. He/she usually has overall responsibility for evaluating the political outcome of various legislative proposals and constituent requests. The Admin. Asst. is usually the person in charge of overall office operations, including the assignment of work and the supervision of key staff.
- **Legislative Director (LD), Legislative Assistant (LA), and Legislative Counsel:**
The Legislative Director is usually the staff person who monitors the legislative schedule and makes recommendations regarding the pros and cons of particular issues. In some congressional offices there are several Legislative Assistants and responsibilities are assigned to staff with particular expertise in specific areas. For example, depending on the responsibilities and interests of the member, an office may include a different Legislative Assistant for health issues, environmental matters, taxes, etc.

- **Press Secretary or Communications Director:**
The Press Secretary's responsibility is to build and maintain open and effective lines of communication between the member, his/her constituency, and the general public. The Press Secretary is expected to know the benefits, demands, and special requirements of both print and electronic media, and how to most effectively promote the Member's views or position on specific issues.
- **Appointment Secretary, Personal Secretary, or Scheduler:**
The Appointment Secretary is usually responsible for allocating a Member's time among the many demands that arise from Congressional responsibilities, staff requirements, and constituent requests. The Appointment Secretary may also be responsible for making necessary travel arrangements, arranging speaking dates, visits to the district, etc.
- **Caseworker:**
The Caseworker is the staff member usually assigned to help with constituent requests by preparing replies for the Member's signature. The Caseworker's responsibilities may also include helping resolve problems constituents present in relation to federal agencies, e.g., Social Security and Medicare issues, veteran's benefits, passports, etc. There are often several Caseworkers in a Congressional office.
- **Other Staff Titles:**
Other titles used in a Congressional office may include: Executive Assistant, Legislative Correspondent, Executive Secretary, Office Manager, and Receptionist.