

Let's Talk with Our Legislators

Remember: The American Legion will not endorse or support any particular candidate for public office.

There are three basic ways to communicate your point of view to your legislator: by personal visit, letters/email or by phone. The personal visit is probably the most effective method, particularly if your legislator knows you or is familiar with the group or organization you represent.

Personal Visit

One of the most effective ways to “lobby” legislators is a face-to-face visit. Many legislators have offices within their home districts and make time available for meetings with constituents. All legislators have offices at the Capitol, although it is difficult for them to make and keep appointments during the session because of the hectic pace. Most legislators, however, will find a way to meet with constituents who have traveled to the Capitol. It is a good idea to visit your legislator in small groups – no more than 3 or 4 – and to keep your visit as brief as you can. Be sure that your legislator knows that you are a constituent. If you have family, social, business or military ties, mentioning them may help you make a strong connection with your legislator. Let your legislator know if you are working with a coalition on the issue, or if you are representing members of your organization.

Be clear about what your position is and exactly what you want your legislator to do. Identify legislation by bill number. A brief, one page written assessment of your issue should be presented to your legislator so that he or she can refer to it later. Be firm on your position and remember that it is OK to disagree, but don't argue or threaten your legislator if he or she disagrees with your stand. You will need his or her support on future issues. Be sure and follow up with any information requested by your legislator. A brief thank you is always appreciated and helps your legislator remember you and your issue.

Letters/Emails

If you are a constituent, begin your letter/email by saying so.

Make clear your position and exactly what you want your legislator to do. Identify legislation by bill number. Avoid form letters/emails. Use your own words and personalize your letter/email by explaining how the issue will affect you, your family, your profession, community or Veterans. Timing is important. It is most effective to communicate with a legislator well ahead of when the bill is being considered in his or her chamber.

Be sure and thank your legislator when he or she votes as you had requested. It is important to let your legislator know if you are pleased with the job that he or she is doing.

Phone Calls

If the legislature is in session, your legislator is likely to be on the chamber floor or in committee meetings. When talking to a secretary or aide, identify yourself by name, address and hometown. Identify the bill by number and state how you want your legislator to vote. If you want to discuss the bill more fully with your legislator, ask that your call be returned and leave a number where you can be reached later in the day.

Contacting your legislator may seem intimidating, but it's important to remember that he or she is elected to represent you in the legislative process. It's worth the effort and does get easier with a little practice.

How to Form a Relationship with Your Legislators

It is important to interact with elected decision-makers on a regular basis. When you have an issue to discuss, you have already established a relationship.

1. Develop a year-round relationship with state legislators.
2. Add their names to mailing lists.
3. Invite them to events.
4. Get to know legislative staff as well and invite them to events.
5. Introduce them at events or give them special greetings upon arrival.
6. Thank them for state funding currently received.
7. Visit their offices - make your visits brief.
8. Assume your legislators are allies. Be positive.
9. Keep a background file on your legislators. Learn who they are.
10. Give public recognition to deserving legislators. Mention their positive assistance.
11. Make sure they understand you want to be looked at as a partner, want to be involved in the legislative process, and you want to help.

Lobbying Tips

1. Lobbying is a year-round process. It is important to interact with elected decision-makers on a regular basis. Then, when you have an issue to discuss, you have already established a relationship. **DON'T** just show up when you need something!
2. Building relationships with lawmakers means getting to know them, their personal interests and histories, and even their families. Having a relationship doesn't guarantee their support, but it does help to ensure that they will listen to you.
3. Being an effective lobbyist means being active in the political process by supporting issues and attending political functions.
4. At the state and federal levels, so many bills are introduced that it's impossible for a lawmaker to study all of them. Instead, they rely on their constituents, other members of Congress or the legislature – and lobbyists – to familiarize them with the contents of many bills. This means that the elected official **NEEDS** to hear from you.
5. Don't overwhelm the elected official with information. Keep it concise and to the point.
6. In presenting your case, make your main point first, followed by supporting points of information.
7. When meeting with an elected official, make sure you're prepared. Try to anticipate every question that might be asked and do your homework in advance. Nothing will cause you to lose credibility faster than being ill-prepared, uncertain or vague.
8. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't bluff. Instead, admit it and promise to have the answer by a certain time.
9. When you are opposing legislation, don't attack those who support it. Stick to the issues and don't get personal.
10. Regard those who oppose you – both lawmakers and members of advocacy groups – as temporary adversaries – **NOT ENEMIES**. Coalitions shift, and the very people you're opposing today might be able to help you tomorrow.
11. If a bill you are opposing contains some good points, acknowledge them rather than knocking the legislation as a whole. Then focus on the provisions that you oppose, pointing out their flaws and giving the reasons why what you're proposing is better.
12. Familiarize yourself with the decision-making process and timing. Your local or state elected officials won't appreciate hearing from you the night before the bill is scheduled for a vote.
13. Don't forget to say, "Thanks for your help."

To find your legislators' contact information, visit www.legis.iowa.gov/contacts