

A Guide to Communicating with Members of Congress

Sending letters and emails, making phone calls and paying personal visits are typical ways in which constituents get their message to legislators. While an individualized letter or email is an influential means of communicating, a postal letter may be delayed because of heightened security measures. If the issue is urgent, the letter can be faxed or emailed. A phone call is more personal than an electronic message and usually has more impact. You can be most effective in conveying a message by relating issues to your own personal experience or professional expertise, or to the likely effects on a member's constituents.

Make sure you effectively communicate with your Member of Congress.

Effective Communication – What To Do and Not To Do

What To Do

- Identify clearly the subject or subjects in which you are interested, not just House and Senate bill numbers.
- State why you are concerned about an issue or issues. Sharing your own personal experience, particularly as a member of the medical community, is excellent supporting evidence.
- Explain how you think an issue will affect patients, the medical profession, your community or family.
- Restrict yourself to one, or at most, two topics.
- Put thoughts in your own words. If a member of Congress receives numerous letters with nearly identical wording, he or she may *discount them* as part of an organized pressure campaign.
- Try to establish an ongoing relationship with your representative or senators, which will give you more influence as a constituent.
- Get involved early in the legislative process by communicating while legislation is being considered by congressional committees, as well as when it is on the House and Senate floor.
- Find out the committees and subcommittees on which your representative or senators serve.
- Use the AMA Grassroots Hotline, 1-800-833-6354, to call Congress. Use the AMA in Washington website, www.ama-assn.org/grassroots to sign up for action alerts and to contact Congress today.

What Not To Do

- Do not threaten. Do not hint “I’ll never vote for you unless you do what I want.” Present the best arguments in favor of your position and ask for their consideration in a respectful manner.
- Do not pretend to wield vast political influence. Contact your member as a constituent, not a self-appointed spokesperson for the medical community.
- Do not use trite phrases or clichés. They make your letter sound mass-produced when it is not. Just be yourself.

- Do not ever link campaign contributions to legislative support.

Suggestions for Correspondence

Letters can be delivered to your member's office by email, fax or postal service. Written communications are most effective early in the legislative process. You can find your member's contact information by visiting the AMA in Washington website at www.ama-assn.org/grassroots.

Be sure to write on personal or business letterhead. This will eliminate any doubt about your name and address. If you do not have printed letterhead, type your name and address at the end of your letter and sign above it. Avoid "form" letters. Representatives read a significant portion of their mail personally, while Senators typically ask their staff to select the most interesting and captivating letters. Congressional offices keep a weekly and, in some cases, daily count of contacts regarding particular issues. *Your letters count.*

Writing Tips

1. Your purpose for writing should be stated in the first paragraph of the letter. If the letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly, such as H.R. ____ or S. ____.
2. Explain who you represent and your vested interest in the topic. Be courteous, to the point, and include key information, using examples to support your position.
3. Address only one issue in each letter. If possible, keep the letter to one page.
4. Avoid "form" letters. Use your own words to reflect your position.

Suggestions for Phone Calls

Phone calls can be an effective way to make your views known to a member of Congress, although often times you will speak with the staff. Phone calls can also be used to learn where a member of Congress stands on an issue, which you can then incorporate into a follow-up letter. Phone calls are very effective when time is of the essence, such as in the days or hours leading up to important votes.

Be sure to do your homework before you call. Chances are good that the staff person on the other end will specialize in the issue you discuss. And remember, "I don't know", is a very acceptable response, especially when followed by, "but I will be sure to get back to you." Be sure to follow up. If you do not know a member of Congress' phone number, call the AMA Grassroots Hotline at 1-800-833-6354 to be connected to your member of Congress.

Addressing Correspondence

To A Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510
Dear Senator (last name):

To a Representative:

The Honorable (full name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
Dear Representative (last name):

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 issue or legislative matter. 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 member of the staff 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. If possible, bring information and materials that support your position. These are often available from the AMA. Members of Congress 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. Whenever 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. When it is appropriate, 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.

Update the AMA. After your visit with your elected official, take the opportunity to also update the AMA, your state medical society, and/or your specialty society. Sharing your experience not only offers the AMA good feedback for future AMA member outreach, but also enhances their ability to lobby that issue. With your help, the AMA can more effectively advocate on behalf of its physician and student members. 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 and Job Functions

Administrative Assistant (AA) or Chief of Staff (CoS): The AA reports directly to the member of Congress. H/she usually has overall responsibility for evaluating the political outcomes of various legislative proposals and constituent requests. The AA is usually a person in charge of overall office operations, including the assignment of work and the supervision of key staff.

Legislative Director (LD) or Legislative Assistant (LA): The LD is usually the staff person who monitors the legislative schedule, oversees the Legislative Assistants (LA's) and makes recommendations regarding the pros and cons of particular issues. Most congressional offices also include several LA's with part the member, an office may include a different LA for health issues, environmental matters, taxes, etc.

Press Secretary (Press Secy.) or Communications Director (Comm. Dir.): The Press Secretary's responsibility is to build and maintain open and effective lines of communication between the member, his/her constituency, the media 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 (Appt. Secy.), Personal Secretary, or Scheduler (Sch): 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. This person may play a critical role in securing an appointment with the member of Congress.

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, such as Social Security, Medicare issues, veteran's benefits, passports, etc. There are often several Caseworkers in a

congressional office. Other titles used in a congressional office may include: Executive Assistant, Legislative Correspondent, Executive Secretary, Office Manager, and Receptionist.

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