



The Ohio Association of Child Caring Agencies

Legislative Communications A “How-to Guide”

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INTRODUCTION:

The mission of the Ohio Association of Child Caring Agencies (OACCA) is to promote and strengthen a fully-integrated, private/public network of high-quality services for Ohio's children and their families through advocacy, education, and support of member agencies.

Much of our work in fulfillment of this mission involves effective legislative advocacy on behalf of our membership, organizations that provide care and services for troubled children and families. OACCA repeatedly demonstrates the benefit of successful legislative communications.

However, legislators want to hear from their constituents as well. They want to know how their decisions are affecting the people they represent. For this reason, the OACCA encourages and fully supports our members' efforts to individually communicate with legislators on both the state and local levels.

The OACCA will continue to advocate on behalf of our members and will offer guidance and assistance to member agencies to help them build or fine-tune their legislative relationships. We recognize that many of our members have limited experience communicating with legislators, so we have provided this "how-to" guide. It will assist agencies to ensure that their individual advocacy efforts are targeted and effectively communicate messages that will benefit the children and families that are the reason for our existence. Working together, we can have a tremendous impact.

This legislative communications how-to guide will help focus agency communication efforts and maximize the effectiveness of that communication. If you would like to learn more about how to advocate for your organization and the children and families you serve, the OACCA staff are always available to assist you. Please feel free to call us.

GETTING STARTED:

Speaking out about issues that matter to you and your organization is one of the most important things an organization can do to ensure future success. Reaching out to your legislators can have a surprising impact. All it takes to get started is making a conscious decision to be heard, and following through on that decision with consistency and regularity. By consistently communicating with your legislators, relationships will naturally develop, gradually making advocacy efforts easier and more effective. Remember...

- **You Can Make a Difference**- It takes one person to initiate change!
- **People working together Can Make a Difference!**
The Alzheimer's Association convinced the government to invest resources into research for a cure. Mother's Against Drunk Driving (MADD) convinced dozens of states to toughen up their drunk driving laws. Lesson: People working together can make a difference!
- **Advocacy Helps Find Practical Solutions-People thinking creatively and asking their elected officials for support can generate innovative solutions that overcome the root-cause of a problem.**
- **Advocacy is Simple**
- **Policymakers Need Your Expertise**-Direct service providers and community groups are closer to the real problems-they see and experience the problems first -hand. They can make the problems and possible solutions real to policymakers. Personal stories are powerful tools for change.
- **Advocacy Helps People**
- **Advocacy Advances a Cause and Builds Public Trust**

(Adapted from the Ohio Association of Nonprofit Organizations-Public Policy, "Ten Reasons to Lobby for Your Cause")

A. Get to Know Them

Prior to making attempts at influencing legislative decisions, you should be sure that the legislator you are communicating with is aware of who you are and the function of the organization you represent. A casual introduction at a benefit or event can be helpful.

Create an opportunity to put yourself in front of the legislator. Most legislators' schedules are published in legislative periodicals and are readily available to the public. The OACCA staff will help you locate these publications.

When meeting the legislator for the first time, be sure to indicate which organization you represent and explain the services you provide. Offer a tour of your facility and follow-up with the legislator by sending a packet of background information to his/her office.

B. Be Prepared

It is important to be sure of the messages that you or your organization wants to communicate. OACCA has developed a public policy agenda to help you with this. As you begin, think about the result that you are working for and the best way to explain each issue. Be sure your messages are focused and clear prior to attempting to communicate with your legislators. Consider how your

messages will sound to others and the most effective way to communicate them. Remember to keep it simple.

Start by brainstorming all of the important issues that your organization would like to see addressed by the legislature. Once a list has been compiled, prioritize it according to importance and which issues will have the greatest direct affect on your organization.

Once your legislative agenda is complete and ordered according to priority, decide exactly what action the legislature must take. After the desired results of your organization's planned advocacy efforts are identified, focus on developing clear, concise messages that are vital to effectively communicating your organization's position on each issue.

C. Legislative Education

Legislators want to hear from their constituents and will listen to them. They want to be informed and make good decisions. However, no legislator can be an expert on every issue. Before you can communicate your organization's position on an issue, it is important to educate the legislator on the issue. Provide the information and facts necessary for that legislator to do his or her job well. This is especially true of newly elected officials. Once the legislator is up to speed on the issues and the laws affecting those issues, your concerns are more likely to be considered and addressed effectively.

Your relationship with your legislators should begin with efforts to properly educate them about the issues important to you, but start slowly. Do not overwhelm your legislator with an abundance of facts, figures, jargon, or acronyms pertaining to multiple issues. Begin with one issue, keep the explanation as clear and concise as possible, and be sure you are heard and the information is understood. Then you can introduce the next item.

As issues change, it is important to keep your legislator informed about how those changes affect your organization. By continuing to communicate with your legislator, you will be able to keep issues important to you in the fore front of your legislators' concern. Consistent communication develops these important relationships.

D. Building New Relationships

After each election, build relationships with newly elected officials as well as incumbents whom your organization has previously not contacted. Building and nurturing relationships with legislators will make advocacy efforts more effective and will make initiating contact regarding future issues easier. Following are some tips to get your legislative relationships off the ground:

- Write congratulatory letters on their election or re-election and express interest in communicating throughout the term.
- Provide background information on your organization. Ensure legislators receive all appropriate position papers and ask to be added to their information distribution list.
- Discuss your organization's work, current situation, future plans and issues of concern. An invitation to visit your office or facility is an especially good idea; allow the legislator to

meet your entire board. If appropriate, invite them to meet children or families you serve.

- Follow-up any and all contact with a thank you letter.

****Building and maintaining relationships with legislative staff members is equally as important as your relationships with the legislators.**** Never underestimate the importance of a legislator's aide. They are the gatekeepers and play a key role in determining what information gets attention from the legislator. Legislative staff members are easier to reach than the legislator is. In fact, most times you will have to go through the staff to make any contact with the legislator. Treat aides just as you would your legislator, not just as a matter of courtesy, but because aides are in positions to advance your cause (or sink it without a trace).

OACCA staff can help determine the legislators with whom you should be building relationships. We can identify relevant committee chairs, influential members and those legislators that are proponents/opponents of the legislation affecting your organization.

MYTH VS. FACT:

MYTH: Advocates must be experts.

FACT: You don't have to be an "expert" and you don't need to be a "professional". Don't worry...legislators are not the experts... you can talk to them. They need and want to hear from "real people" (yes, YOU!) about what's happening to YOU.

MYTH: It takes too much time.

FACT: You control how much or how little time you spend on making a difference (advocacy). If you have time to make a phone call, you have enough time to make a difference. There are a lot of other things you can do, too, from writing letters to going to the Statehouse. It's up to you.

MYTH: Advocates need training.

FACT: If you have spoken up for your child at school, served on a committee at church, or helped organize a block party, you have the skills you need to be an advocate. The most important thing you can do is share your own experiences, knowledge and concerns.

MYTH: No one will listen to me.

FACT: People think that their voices won't be heard by elected officials. But your silence speaks for you. Your silence says you agree with what they are doing. Do you really agree? When you say nothing, legislators assume that everything is OK. If you speak out, they know that people are watching...even if they don't do what you want.

MYTH: My organization is not big enough or important enough to matter.

FACT: Legislators want to hear from their constituency. They want to make informed decisions and want to know how those decisions affect the people they represent.

MYTH: You have to give a financial contribution to be heard.

FACT: Most legislators make a point to listen to as many people as they can. They are aware that not everyone can afford to make campaign contributions.

LEGISLATIVE COMMUNICATIONS: TELEPHONE:

You might be surprised to learn how interested legislators are in hearing from their constituency. Part of their job is to respond to you. However, legislative offices are besieged with phone calls and they often get lost in the mix and will receive little more attention than being included in the office tally.

Communicating with your legislator via telephone may not be the most effective way for your position to be heard, but it is better than nothing. Calls are an effective way to register your opinion for or against something, especially when legislation that affects your organization is pending.

Often when a call is made, a legislative assistant will take your call, but your message will get to the legislator. If you want to talk personally to the legislator, just say so, although whether or not you get through will depend on timing. A phone call from a person or organization representative known to the legislator always has a slightly better chance of receiving attention. For this reason, we stress the importance of getting to know your legislators **before** you need something from them.

Here are some quick and simple tips:

1. Write out what you want to say.
 - Gathering your thoughts on paper first will help you stay on target and get your message across.
 - Make bullet points of the important points you want to make.
2. Stay focused on the subject.
 - If you write down your thoughts before you call, you'll be able to check off the points you want to make. Don't be afraid to steer the legislator back to the subject you are concerned with. Sometimes legislators will make statements such as:

"it's very complicated" or "we don't have the money."

Such statements do not lessen the importance of your legislator understanding your concerns. In fact it makes it even more important.
 - Think about your responses before you call. For example, I understand it's complicated, but we need long-term solutions; or there's money for a lot of other purposes...it's a matter of priorities. Make offers to assist in development of solutions or alternatives.
3. Introduce yourself.
 - State your name and where you live.

- Give your phone number and email address so they can contact you.
 - If you are a registered voter, tell them...they want to know.
 - If your organization shares a position on a bill with others, tell the legislator. Let them know you are not alone in your position.
 - Let them know that you are a member of the Ohio Association of Child Caring Agencies.
4. State your concerns and explain your organization's position.
- State your issue and position up front. Give one or two short reasons for your position and offer to provide more detail upon request.
 - Tell them about your personal experience...it works! They need to hear how a bill will hurt or help you in your everyday life. If possible, give them a fact that will help support your story and position. Be brief, but paint a vivid picture in their mind. Put a real face on the issue.
 - The staff members answering the phone are making brief notes about the subject of your call and your opinion. If you have something that cannot be said in several sentences, write a letter.
5. Know the bill number that you are concerned with.
- If you are calling about a specific bill that you've heard about, it's helpful to have the bill number. All bills have a number. Legislators have hundreds of bills that call for their attention. Giving the bill number will give you a better chance of being heard.
 - Call OACCA if you need help or information about specific bills.
6. Say exactly what you want the legislator to do. They need to know specifically that you want them to:
- Propose a bill to change something you don't like.
 - Support a bill you think is a good idea.
 - Oppose a bill you think is a bad idea.
 - Change a bill so that it's better. (Be sure to specify what you want changed and how).
7. Listen carefully.
- Listen and take notes on what a legislator or assistant says. Feel free to ask questions if you don't understand the words they use or what they're saying. If you don't know an answer to a question, tell them you will find out and get back to them. Then be sure you do.
8. Follow up on your call.
- Send a thank you note to your legislator. Stay in touch with more information, follow-up calls, and meetings.

9. Finally, be sure to get a commitment from them stating what they will do.
 - Realize that the staff member answering the phone may have been instructed not to make detailed comments about issues; this is done in letters, so the legislator's position is not misrepresented.
 - Try to get a specific answer as you can either by phone or in writing.
 - Follow up your conversation in writing. Be sure to thank the staff member for his or her time.
10. Be sure to keep the OACCA staff informed and up to date regarding contacts you have had with your legislator.

Sample telephone script:

Hello.

My name is <name, title, and organization>.

I am calling to speak with Representative Doe <or Senator Doe> about bill # ...

Is he <or she> available to speak with me?

If yes:

Introduce yourself again, stating your name, title, organization and reason for calling again. Thank them for taking the time to talk with you.

Work through your prepared messages, facts and anecdotes quickly but succinctly.

If no:

Is there an aide available to speak with me about bill #...?

If you are able to speak with an aide, speak with the aide as if you are speaking with the legislator. Thank them for taking the time to talk with you. Work through your prepared messages, facts and anecdotes quickly but succinctly. (The information will be passed along, and the aides play a key role in the decision making process.)

Don't forget to get the name of the aide for future reference. Relationships with legislative aides are equally as important as relationships with legislators.

Again, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to listen to my concerns. If you have any questions, or would like more information, please feel free to contact me.

I can be reached at either <phone number> or <email>.

Good-bye.

LEGISLATIVE COMMUNICATIONS: PERSONAL MEETINGS:

Legislators want to talk to “real people.” They are not the experts...you are the expert. Only you can tell them how things are for you, and personal meetings create an invaluable and memorable learning opportunity for the legislator.

A benefit of personal meetings is that it is one of the few situations in which you will have the full attention of the legislator, especially if you are able to conduct the meeting at your facility rather than the legislator’s office. However, now that you have his/her ear, be sure you are prepared and your messages are focused.

1. Getting ready for the meeting:

- Choose a place for the meeting that will make you feel comfortable. If you decide to hold the meeting at your organization offices, be sure to arrange a tour for the legislator so that the experience will be that much more memorable for them.
- Try to schedule the meeting when the legislature is not in session so you can get your legislator's full attention. During the legislative session, their schedules are very busy. You can call OACCA or the legislator’s office to see if they are in session.
- Do not expect to speak directly with the legislator when scheduling the meeting. However, any and all information relayed to the legislator’s staff member will be passed along. So, do not forget to leave your name, number and organization/department.
- Prepare for the meeting by writing out what you want to say and limit it to one or two issues.
- Invite members of other organizations that are on your side of the issues.
- Know your legislator's background (committee assignments, district, voting record, etc.). OACCA can provide this information to you if needed.
- Provide a position paper or other information that will help clarify your points. Doing so will also provide the legislator with reference materials for future meetings. Include your contact information.
- Brief staff ahead of time. By doing so, you can gather valuable information about their concerns and questions. Also, this will allow you and them to be better prepared for the meeting. Keep staff fully informed and fully prepared-never let them walk into a meeting unprepared.

2. At the meeting:

- Be patient. Legislators, and even their aides, often run late.

- Each person should talk unless you have a large group-then delegate one person to be the representative for the group.
- Be in control and don't be frightened or intimidated. Clearly state your purpose and request early in the meeting. . Politely, but firmly, explain what you want – without getting sidetracked.
 - Make the most of the first five minutes of the meeting-open graciously, but get to the point. (Legislators and legislative staff may be called away after only a few minutes).
- Be specific about what you want the legislator to do.
 - Propose a bill to change something you don't like.
 - Support a bill you think is a good idea.
 - Oppose a bill you think is a bad idea.
 - Change a bill so that it's better. (Be sure to specify what you want changed and how).
- Listen very, very carefully.
 - What exactly did the legislator or staff say they would do?
 - When did they say they would do it?
 - What did they request you to do?
 - Do not make assumptions or inferences beyond what is actually promised.
- Dialogue, Not Monologue
 - Get as much information out of a meeting as you convey in a meeting-don't just rattle off your request, shake hands and leave.
 - Answer questions, and then address the reasons why they might have asked those questions. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know", but be sure to offer to get the information and call back with it or deliver it to them.
 - If you don't understand why they are asking a question, ask them to explain their concerns
- Get your legislator to say specifically what he/she will do.
- Leave any materials with them.
- Make it clear you will follow up and monitor the legislator's actions.
- Thank them for their time.
- Remember...

<p><u>DO</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Be affirming -Be appreciative -Be courteous -Be brief -Be clear and concise -Be prepared -Be persistent 	<p><u>DON'T</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Make personal attacks -Be rude or sarcastic -Be defensive -Take personal offense to interruptions -Have a group discussion among your delegation during the visit -Give up hope if the legislator is
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unresponsive
-Take no personally; opponents
may be allies on other issues

3. After the meeting:

- Send a thank you note to your legislator.
- Stay in touch. Follow-up with additional information as needed.
- Contact OACCA to keep them informed and up to date regarding the legislator's visit.

Sample agenda for a meeting with a legislator:

Date of meeting

Location of meeting

Participants

<list all meeting attendees>

1. Introductions
 - a. Name, title, organization
2. Purpose of meeting
 - a. Bill number or specific issue
3. Organizational background
 - a. Review organization's function and mission
 - b. Mention the location of the organization
 - c. Mention the location of organization's clientele and stakeholders
4. Issue 1
 - a. Organization's position on issue
 - b. Rationale for position on bill or issue
 - c. Present support materials
 - d. Review supporting facts and figures
 - e. Descriptive anecdote
 - f. Offer assistance developing solution and/or alternatives
5. Issue 2
 - a. Organization's position on issue
 - b. Rationale for position on bill or issue
 - c. Present support materials
 - d. Review supporting facts and figures
 - e. Descriptive anecdote
 - f. Offer assistance developing solution and/or alternatives
6. Conclusion
 - a. Present contact information
 - b. Offer additional information if required
 - c. Offer to answer any questions that may arise
 - d. Offer a tour of the organization's facility
 1. Schedule time and date if possible
 - e. Thank you

LEGISLATIVE COMMUNICATIONS: WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE:

Letter writing can be a very effective form of communicating with your legislator. By writing letters, you are able to clearly communicate your position on issues while at the same time, respecting the time of the legislator with whom you are communicating.

Although elected officials typically have very busy schedules, most make a point of responding to the concerns of their constituents. A response to a letter may take a little more time to get than other forms of communication, but, done properly, can be efficient and your letter will be filed for future reference and for information on the issue discussed in the letter.

Make sure to address your correspondence to legislators correctly. All members of Congress and the General Assembly, as well as the Governor and President, may be addressed as "The Honorable First Name, Last Name", followed by their address. Senators, both state and US, are addressed as "Dear Senator Last Name". Representatives, both state and US, are addressed as "Dear Representative Last Name".

Following are a few tips for writing letters to your legislators:

1. Identify your messages
 - First paragraph-state who you are and where you live or your agency is located so it is clear that you are a constituent. Make sure to include any credentials or first hand experience that would make you particularly credible on a particular issue. At minimum, you have credibility because you live in the legislator's district and you have an opinion.
2. Be professional, concise and polite
 - Do not use threats or intemperate language, and do not digress to side issues.
3. State your issue and position up front.
 - Second Paragraph-identify 2 or 3 key messages that you want to communicate to the legislator and stick with them. Focus on what you want the legislator to hear, but keep it simple and brief. Tie the issue to the larger needs of the community and make long-term benefits to large groups of people known.
 - Give one or two short reasons for your position and offer to provide more detail upon request
4. Use anecdotes
 - Use anecdotes and brief stories as examples of how the specific legislation affects your organization and the children and families you serve. Explain in specific terms how your request will benefit your organization, your clients and others.
5. Use your relationship

- If you know the legislator personally, refer to the relationship. It will signal the staff member to speed up getting the letter to the legislator. (This is a good example of how building relationships will benefit your advocacy efforts.)
- Never refer to your own campaign contributions in a letter about legislation. Such a reference could be misinterpreted and, if you are writing on behalf of your 501 (c)(3), this is illegal.

6. Request a response

- Do not impose a deadline for a response from the legislator. Most legislators view responding to their constituents as an important aspect of their job. However, if you think past responses have been vague or tardy, gently and politely indicate your concern in the context of the pending nature of the issue.
- Be clear about what you hope the legislator will do. Indicate the course of action you want from the legislator.
- Close the letter by thanking the legislator for his/her time and asking for a response letter stating the legislator's position
- Remember to include you first and last name, street address, phone number with area code and email address.

7. Make a copy of your letter and retain it for your records.

8. Send a courtesy copy to OACCA of any correspondence you send to or receive from a legislator.

Sample letter to a legislator:

<Date>

The Honorable John Doe
Ohio Senate
Statehouse
Columbus, Ohio 43215

or

The Honorable John Doe
Ohio House of Representatives
77 South High Street
Columbus, Ohio 43266-0603

Dear <Senator Doe or Representative Doe>:

I am writing on behalf of ... to address the concerns we have with bill #...

<Body Copy>

Sincerely,

<name>

<title>

cc: Penny Wyman, Executive Director, Ohio Association of Child Caring Agencies
Bob Smith, Esq., Legislative Agent

PUBLIC HEARINGS:

Testifying at public hearings is an extremely important part of advocacy. Hearings cannot be ignored, even though they may be frustrating. You can call the OACCA staff to find out if a bill has been scheduled for a public hearing and if you should appear to testify. The OACCA staff may request that you, your staff, and/or foster/adoptive parents provide testimony at a public hearing. Following are some facts about public hearings:

- Lines to sign up to speak at hearings can be very long. Don't wait until the last minute to line up witnesses, get information or plan for events related to the hearing.
- Hearings are sometimes held on short notice.
- Be prepared to get to the Statehouse early to sign up to testify at the hearing.
- Any time that you plan to offer testimony, the committees request that you bring at least twenty-five copies of your written testimony for distribution to committee members and others.
- The number of bills on the agenda can be very large. Despite time limits (usually 3 minutes), many witnesses speak at length because legislators ask questions.
- Frequently two or three hearings on the same issue (different bill number) are held before different committees, making it difficult to monitor and influence the process.