



Be Prepared: Communicating With Legislators

Who represents you? Find out here: <http://www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us/>

Lobbying legislators is about persuading them to do what you want. The first step to exerting any kind of influence over their decision making is to build a solid **relationship** with them and their staff. Advocates need to earn and nurture their legislator's respect.



There are a few guidelines to follow when establishing your agenda and goals: Know what subject you are going to address with them, do not overload them with too much information, and stick to no more than two or three issues.

Some tips for communicating with legislators include:

- Show that you understand their time constraints by providing summaries of lengthy reports.
- Use attention grabbers, e.g. a bright colored paper that jumps out of a pile of correspondence.
- Show an interest in other issues on which your legislator is working.
- Tell both sides of an issue so that your legislator can anticipate the opposition.
- Compliment the legislator if he/she has done an effective job on anything; a little thank you goes a long way.
- Get to know the legislator's aides—they are the key to getting information or access to the legislator.
- Provide positive media opportunities for your legislators through events such groundbreaking ceremonies, ribbon cuttings, annual meetings, tours—anything that gets them noticed.
- Honor your legislators at annual meetings, special events, etc. Give unusual awards instead of the ordinary certificate or plaque that will attract attention in their office.
- Remember their birthdays and other events; send a congratulatory note if you hear anything positive about them.

Creating opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to be included in their communities and make the choices that affect their lives.

8001 Centre Park Drive, Suite 100 • Austin, TX 78754 • 512-454-6694 • 1-800-252-9729 • fax 512-454-4956

www.thearcoftexas.org



- Use information that is accurate. Information that is vague or not true will only tell them you cannot be trusted. Legislators appreciate people who have reliable information.

While this is by no means an exhaustive list of ways to build effective relationships, there are also things that **advocates do NOT want to do:**

- Do not confront or challenge your legislator by saying things like “You promised me/us...”; rather say, “I understood you to say...”
- Do not take too long when meeting with them or talking to them at an event. Show that you respect their time and recognize it is as valuable as yours.
- Do not lecture your legislator. They will respond better if you have a clear, concise message to leave them with.
- Do not threaten them with negative consequences such as getting them voted out of office.

The most important thing to remember is that elected officials are just like everyone else. They appreciate people who show an understanding and respect for the individual legislator’s personal philosophy or issues, and they take note of service systems and alliances that have a clear strategic vision. However, realize that legislators cannot always comply with requests from advocates. If you do not get everything you asked for, thank them for what they did do, or even for their willingness to listen, and then follow up.



Meeting with Legislators:

Every citizen has the right to seek a meeting with their legislators (The Democracy Center, 2003). Meeting legislators face-to-face is the most effective way to get your message across. Advocates can meet decision makers in the capitol, or in their/your local district.

Some important rules to remember when meeting with legislators include:

- Make appointments as far in advance as possible for the amount of time needed.
- Arrive early, but be prepared to wait.
- If advocates are meeting a legislator in the capitol, keep the group small as legislator offices are not large enough for hundreds of people.
- Choose a spokesperson for the group, or agree on a speaking order. This will assure the message is concise and clear.

Creating opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to be included in their communities and make the choices that affect their lives.

8001 Centre Park Drive, Suite 100 • Austin, TX 78754 • 512-454-6694 • 1-800-252-9729 • fax 512-454-4956

www.thearcoftexas.org



- Make the group diverse. Include self-advocates, family members and professionals—people who can address an issue from multiple sides.
- Be informal, but not disrespectful.
- Avoid using acronyms and jargon. The legislator may not be familiar with terms (e.g. HCBS, IDEA, ADA, MR).
- Know in advance with whom advocates will meet. If it's an aide and not the legislator, that's OK. They are the portal to getting information to the legislator.
- Be specific about what the desired action is from the decision maker (act on a bill, support increased funding, etc.).
- Be prepared to answer questions.
- Bring information to leave with the legislator. Include information on the issue, as well as how the legislator or their aides can contact advocates for further information. Also leave information about the organization or coalition advocates are representing.
- Follow up. Advocates need to send a thank you letter, provide further information, and stay involved in what the legislator does next.



Public Testimony: Share Your Story

Attending public hearings organized by the legislator or a committee, or by other organizations, can be an excellent occasion for advocates to learn what the status of an issue is. **It is also a chance for advocates to provide information and education to legislators and their aides on ongoing issues of importance.** Offering your expertise to committee members or staffers can mean they come to rely on you for information.

Public hearings are generally held after a bill is assigned to a legislative committee. It can also be scheduled to get input into drafting rules, or to see how well current laws or programs are working. Sometimes they are held as a requirement by law before a statute can be approved or implemented. They are usually held in the capitol, but can be held back in a legislator's district as well.

Reasons public hearings are important are to:

- Educate and influence legislators
- Educate the public

Creating opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to be included in their communities and make the choices that affect their lives.

8001 Centre Park Drive, Suite 100 • Austin, TX 78754 • 512-454-6694 • 1-800-252-9729 • fax 512-454-4956

www.thearcoftexas.org



- Publicize positions, problems and solutions
- Test reactions to positions
- Learn what others are thinking and asking about the issue

With **testimony**, individuals are called on to give prepared statements on the issue being addressed at the public hearing. **This is the chance for advocates to tell their story and humanize the issue.**

Tips for developing testimony include:

- Become familiar with the issue and how it affects you and others.
- Gather available data, including pertinent statistics. Legislators want hard data (cost of care, numbers on waiting lists, etc.).
- Begin by identifying yourself, the group you represent, the bill number and title, and your position.
- Be brief and accurate, leaving out lengthy philosophizing and avoiding clichés, repetition or threats.
- Use personal examples to make your point.
- Do not make claims you are not prepared to defend.
- Prepare a written copy of your testimony to leave with committee members, attendees, and the media, including your name and contact information for further questions from the legislator (s).
- Have large representation of groups and other advocates testify as well.
- End by thanking the committee or the legislator for the opportunity to testify.

Contact The Arc of Texas anytime for assistance with writing testimony or for support at the Capitol: 1-800-252-9729.