Tips for Contacting Legislators

General Tips

1. **Recognize that legislators deal with a wide range of issues.** Legislators cannot possibly keep completely informed on all issues. Be prepared to provide them with information or referral sources.

2. **Know your legislator.** Make a point of referring to something you know is of special interest. Making that personal connection can make him/her remember you more easily.

3. **Get to know the legislator’s staff.** The staff in a legislative office can be very powerful. If they don’t like you, they can make it very difficult for you to make contacts.

4. **Be honest.** Decision-makers appreciate candor and forthrightness.

5. **Know your message.** Be prepared to state your case in a few short sentences.

6. **Cultivate relationships.** Develop relationships with elected officials when you are not asking for something! It is easier to listen to friends than to strangers, and it takes time to get to know each other.
   a. Invite them to an event or performance, and when they attend, publicly acknowledge them and thank them for their support of the arts.
   b. Send newspaper articles about your arts organization and events that convey how the arts and your arts organization serve the legislator’s constituents.
   c. Provide a few statistics on how much service is provided, and the way your agency enhances your community.

Writing Tips (Letter or Email)

1. **Identify yourself and explain your relationship to the issue:** "I am president of ______________, an organization serving ____ members statewide. We are concerned about _____________."

2. **Be Brief:** Limit yourself to 250–500 words, no longer!

3. **Focus on one issue per communication.** Legislators dislike laundry lists of issues.

4. **Reference the bill number.** If you’re writing about pending legislation, either include the bill number or identify the subject as best you can.

5. **Include your name, address, phone number, and email.** If a lawmaker doesn’t know how to reach you, he or she cannot respond. Emails or faxes are recommended, especially in congressional offices where mail must go through security procedures.

6. **Clearly state your position on the issue.** Give reasons for your point of view. Tell how it affects you personally, your family, business, profession, or the community.

7. **Be reasonable.** Legislators are human too. Don’t ask for the impossible. Always be willing to suggest alternatives to the bill or your original suggestion.

8. **Be specific about any request you may have.** “Please let me know your views on this bill/issue…” “Would you be willing to author new legislation in the area of…” “Can you get back to me by (date)?”

9. **Write “from the heart.”** Avoid stereotyped sentences or cliché phrases that might make your letter look like a form letter. Form letters look like they’re part of an organized pressure campaign and don’t have as much impact as a personal letter.

10. **Always say thank you** to the legislator and staff people.
Personal Visit Tips

Face-to-face discussion is the most effective means of communication. It is essential to establishing a solid working relationship.

1. **Schedule a meeting when the governing body is not in session—before pressures build up.** Make an appointment. Call the day ahead to confirm your appointment. When visiting, keep the group small enough for an easy exchange of views.

2. **Recognize that a legislator’s time is precious.** Be punctual. Be succinct in your presentation. Plan for no more than 30 minutes of the legislator’s time.

3. **Be personal and respectful.** The tone of the message is as important as the message, maybe even more so.

4. **Bring success stories.** Tell the story of how the arts and your arts agency serve the legislator’s constituents; give a few statistics on how much service is provided, and the way your agency enhances your community.

5. **Listen.** Give them an opportunity to respond. Think about their responses. What interests them? Where are their comfort zones? Is their reaction positive or negative?

6. **Seal the deal.** Confirm what you think their opinion or stand is.

7. **Leave behind a reminder of your visit.** This could be your agency’s annual report, a promotional brochure, an arts mug, poster, etc. This helps to remind the legislator of your visit and your organization.

8. **Follow-up.** Send thank you letters to the legislators or staff who took time to listen to your issue.

What is the best way to communicate with my elected officials?

An e-mail message is efficient and easy, but is not the last word in effective advocacy communication. Many in public office consider the advocates’ e-mail blasts as the equivalent of preprinted postcards—impersonal communications that can be easily disregarded.

The guiding principle for contacting Congress or any other representative body is simple: personalized messages mean more. In advocacy, quality trumps quantity.

The impact of sending emails to Congress is strengthened by calls from constituents, visits to a legislator’s office, and meetings with legislators at events back home. Ultimately, advocacy is transacted on a personal level.

For more on communicating with legislators, see the NASAA Advocate, **E- Advocacy: On-Line Strategies for Arts Advocacy**.

(from [NASAA NOTES](http://www.enewsbuilder.net/nasaanotes/e_article001335728-cfm?x=bf5pFGV,b57JMnRS))

“If you believe in great things, you may be able to make other people believe in them, too.”

~Oliver Wendell Holmes