



Advocacy Tips*

General Information

First, and very important, *do not wait* until you have or see a problem before you contact your Senator or Representative. You should get to know them and/or their staff as soon after they become elected as is possible. *Try to meet with them when they are at home in your state.* You need to get to know them and they need to get to know you before something happens.

Second, when you work with your Congressional office, *fax or e-mail* them your letter. If you send a letter written on paper through the US mail it will take as long as several months to get to their office if it gets there at all. This is because of the dangerous materials sent to their offices in 2001. Some offices do not even accept mail from people they do not know or they use a process to check the mail that may destroy the paper.

Third, know that you may not get to meet or speak to your Senator or Representative. You may instead *meet with staff.* This is not all bad. Get to know the staff. Sometimes you will find that they believe as you do and they can be very helpful. The staff person may be newly graduated from college and may not know disability issues like you know them. Be prepared to teach them about your issues.

Our elected folks have many staff. The most important one is the Administrative Assistant (AA) or Chief of Staff (CoS). This person is in charge of all other staff. Some offices use different titles such as Executive Assistant or Legislative Director. You will usually speak to a Legislative Assistant (LA). There are several in each office and each one has a different role. Ask to meet with the LA who does health care and/or disability issues. Sometimes you may talk to the Appointment Secretary, sometimes called the Scheduler. You will do this if you want to meet with the Senator or Representative. If you do work through the Scheduler, they may ask for a written request (fax it to them). You might also ask them when they will get back to you.

Fourth, try to *stick with your message.* If the person tries to get you off on another subject, say, that may be a problem but I am here today to talk about certain disability issues like (describe your issue).

Fifth – have someone be the group leader to make sure you get to your issues within the time you have for the meeting. They can help bring you back to the subject and make sure there is not too much time spent on introductions, where you are from, etc.

Finally, please dress and act properly. Do not wear dirty or torn clothing and do not be too loud, relaxed, or rude. Always use their last name unless they tell you to call them by their first name. The staff person and/or your Senator may not know your issue. To make sure the person knows your issue, speak clearly and do not use letters, say “developmental disabilities” instead of “DD”. You may also need to explain what a Developmental Disabilities Council is and what they do. You may want to take them materials on what your Council has done in your state. Sometimes the person may even say something that is just not right. Do not get angry – know that this means you must get the right information to the person and help them understand your issues. It may take some time on your part but it is worth it!

When you meet with Members of Congress

Planning the Meeting:

1. If you are going to Washington and want to meet with all your Senators and Representatives, look up their office addresses first. Then look at a map. Do not go back and forth between the House and Senate. It is a long distance and you will not have time to do this. If two Representatives are in the same building, meet with one before the other.
2. Plan for your meetings to last *15 minutes* – they do not meet with people for longer than 15 minutes unless they really know them. Allow plenty of time to get to the next meeting, at least 30 minutes if you have not done this before.
3. Plan to speak about no more than **3** topics. You do not have time for more. You can leave materials for them to read later.
4. At least two weeks before you want a meeting call their office to make an *appointment*. If you drop by without an appointment, you may have to wait, and you may not get to talk to anyone. Get the names of those with whom you speak and explain that you represent persons with disabilities in your state. If they say they have to call you back ask when you can expect a call.
5. Do not take *too many people* on the visit – over five and your message could get lost in the crowd. Plus, if you meet with an aide it may be in very room with few seats.
6. If you are going from one side to the other (such as Senate to House) ask if *someone can take you* underground to the other side. This will save you time and you will not get lost.
7. Bring a *map* with you. On the map, *mark where you are going* so you can find each building.

At the Meeting:

1. Be *on time and always introduce* yourself, even if you have been there before. Wear a nametag and give them your business card if you have one. Be sure to *get their business card* as well.
2. *Get down to business* quickly. Begin on a helpful note and say the Bill number, title, and author, or state the issue, how you feel about it, and what you want him or her to do.
3. *Thank him or her for previous support*. If you know their record, let them know that you do.
4. Use *personal stories*. A story will leave an image that they will remember later.
5. *Ask* what you can do. Maybe they need to know more about the problem. Offer to send them more when you get home.
6. If they ask you a question and *you do not know the answer*, tell them you will get back to them and make sure you do.

7. Leave *written materials*. Make sure the materials tell how the issue affects people with disabilities in your state.
8. *Thank him or her for their time* and attention. Say again what you want them to do such as vote for or against a bill, support funding for Medicaid, etc. If you are meeting with staff, ask them again to find out what their boss is going to do on your issue and to get back to you with their decision.

After the Meeting:

1. Follow up with a **thank you letter, fax, or e-mail**, saying what you want them to do.
2. If you promised materials or the answer to a question, please do it quickly!

Writing letters

1. Keep it *simple* and use your *own words*. Tell them you are a registered voter in their district (if it is a Representative), or state (if it is a Senator).
2. Use *Bill number*, author, and title, if you are writing about specific legislation.
3. Make sure you know the facts, if you need to, ask for help from a friend.
4. Always type your letter so they can read it.
5. Be *practical*, positive and specific.
6. *State your position* (e.g. oppose or support).
7. Ask for a *reply*.
8. *Thank* them for their time and attention.
9. Put your *return address* in the letter. Envelopes can be thrown away.
10. Don't forget to *sign your letter*. If you are sending an e-mail or fax make sure your name and complete address, phone number, and e-mail address are included. Don't send anonymous letters.
11. *Write again at a later date*, especially if you did not hear from them. But wait at least a month before you do so.

Example of a letter, but do use your own words!

*The Honorable John Doe
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510*

Dear Senator Doe,

I am writing to tell you that I (oppose or support) (insert bill, proposal, or course of action you oppose or support here). I am a registered voter in (name of state). This bill will make my life different because it will (tell what it would do). I would very much like a reply telling me what you think about this important issue. Thank you for your attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

*Name
Address
City, State Zip
E-mail
Phone*

To a Representative

*The Honorable John Doe
House of Representatives
Washington DC 20510*

Dear Mr. Doe,

Etc.

Remember to talk about only one issue in each letter, fax, or e-mail. If possible, make the letter only 1 one page long.

*Thanks to Jane Rhys, Ph.D., Kansas Council on DD and Sheila Romano, Ed.D., Illinois Council on DD, for their contribution to this document.