

## Contacting Your PA Legislator

People are often reluctant to get involved in the political process for several reasons: they believe legislators only listen to high-powered lobbyists and big donors; they don't think legislation will affect their lives directly; or they don't understand how the process works. But the single most important factor in influencing how a legislator votes on a bill is constituent feedback. And since very few people take the time to contact their legislators, one visit, one letter, or even one phone call from a constituent can make all the difference.

### WHY CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATOR?

**It's important.** Most elected officials emphasize constituent contact because understanding why an issue is important to their district or constituents helps inform their voting behavior. Even if your legislator is supportive of your issue/s, you should still call, visit or write, since they will hear from the other side, too.

**It's effective.** While form letters, auto-generated email messages, and bulk petition signatures are recorded by legislative staff, they don't "count" in the same way as a personal call or letter. Bills that generate calls or letters from constituents receive more attention and consideration precisely because a constituent invested time and effort to reach out personally.

**Your story is unique.** Legislators consider hundreds of bills a year and rely on staff, advocates, and constituents for critical information and insight on pending legislation. But they often miss how a bill will directly affect the lives of their constituents. [Personal stories](#) are the most effective way to influence legislators. You are the expert of your own experience—let them know why this legislation matters to you and how it would affect you, a loved one, and/or the district they represent if enacted.

### TIPS FOR WRITING OR CALLING YOUR LEGISLATOR

#### What TO do:

- **Determine which office to contact.** Legislators have at least one district office and a main office in the capitol. Calls and letters are best directed to the legislator's district office; emails can be sent directly to the legislator's email address. If time is of the essence, a call to the Harrisburg office is highly recommended. [[Find your legislator](#)]
- **If calling, it's perfectly fine to speak to legislative or policy staff.** Legislators don't often take calls directly—staff are more accustomed and better prepared to talk with constituents and are diligent about sharing your input with the legislator.
- **Give them your name and request up front.** **Identify yourself as a constituent**—provide your full name and home address—it's how staff ensures you live in the legislator's district. If you are contacting them about a specific piece of legislation, **identify the bill number** (e.g. HB 321) and tell them **how you want your legislator to vote**.

- **Keep it brief.** Cover one issue or bill per visit/contact. State the problem, solution, and the action you want them to take. Legislative staff hears from many constituents on many issues every day, so it helps if you are concise.
- **Personalize your position.** Tell your legislator why this legislation matters to their district and constituents. If you have a personal story to share about how this issue affects you and/or a friend, family member, neighbor, or loved one, *focus on your story*, even if it's at the expense of other arguments. Constituents' personal stories can be extremely persuasive as your legislator shapes his or her position on a bill.
- **Personalize your relationship.** Have you ever voted for this legislator? Have you ever contributed time or money to their campaign? Are you familiar with them through any volunteer, business, or personal relationships? If so, mention those connections. The closer your legislator feels to you, the more persuasive your argument is likely to be.
- **Request a reply.** If you have a specific question for the legislator, be sure to request a response in your letter with your preferred contact info or if you're calling, ask that an aide gets back to you.
- **Your opinion matters.** Your legislator's job is to represent you. You should be courteous and to the point, but do not be afraid to take a firm position. Remember that your elected official may know less about a given issue than you do.
- **Always say thank you.** If you talk to a staffer, say thank you. If you hear from your legislator, thank them for their time. *If your legislator votes in alignment with your position, call or write to say thank you.* Elected officials and their staff, like all of us, appreciate the extra effort when someone takes the time to say thank you—especially since they are often fielding calls from unhappy or concerned constituents.

### What NOT to do:

- **Don't be afraid to say "I don't know."** You can always follow up later with more information.
- **Don't overstate or exaggerate your points.** Making big claims just to make a big impact is misleading and disingenuous and undermines your credibility.
- **Do not insult your opponents.** You certainly can critique the opposition's argument, but insulting the people that oppose you is not only unprofessional, it's also unpersuasive.
- **Avoid using jargon or acronyms.** Legislators are expected to know a lot about many different issues. It's not uncommon for constituents to know more about a specific issue than their legislators, so don't assume they're familiar with the lingo.
- **Don't monopolize the conversation.** Don't burn valuable time talking *at* legislators or staff. *Collecting* information and feedback can be as valuable as *providing* information—if not more so. Besides, no one likes a one-way "conversation", so be sure to have a dialogue and avoid monologues.
- **Do not contact an elected official who does not represent you.** Legislators represent the people in their districts; they aren't (and shouldn't be) responsive to people they don't represent. Valuable staff time is squandered when non-constituents flood phone lines or email inboxes.
  - **Note:** This applies to *individuals* contacting their elected officials *as constituents*. If you are representing an organization that supports/opposes a bill, contact any legislator who will be voting on the bill and mention you are calling on behalf of your organization.

## LETTER / EMAIL TEMPLATE

Your Address

Phone number

Email

Legislator's Name and Address

Dear Representative/Senator [name],

Introduce yourself as a constituent. State the reason for your letter in the first sentence. If you are referencing a bill, include the bill number and subject matter.

Keep the letter brief, specific, and concise—not more than one page. Offer 2–3 reasons why they should support your position. Personalize the letter by including examples of how the legislation might affect you and/or your family. And, if relevant, personalize your relationship with the legislator.

Restate your request at the end of the letter, e.g., urging them to support or oppose the bill. Thank the legislator for their time and offer to address any questions they might have. Be sure to include your preferred contact information.

Sincerely,

Sign/type your name

## LETTER / EMAIL SAMPLE

Dear Senator Smith,

My name is Jane Doe and I live in your district at 111 Anyplace Lane in Pennsylvania. I am writing to urge you to oppose the abortion ban bill, Senate Bill 5.

SB 5 undermines the ability of women and families to make personal and private medical decisions. It also dictates the relationship between health care providers and their patients, putting patients' health at risk. It is important to reserve personal decisions regarding health care and family planning to a woman and her chosen support team. I am a registered nurse and have seen first-hand the damage done when elected officials with little to no medical knowledge dictate women's access to reproductive health care.

I know that you care about women who face difficult decisions. Last year, I heard you deliver the keynote address at a fundraiser I helped organize for our county domestic violence shelter. You spoke passionately about the need to empower women through better support and resources to make the right choices for themselves. Those choices include decisions about their relationships *and* their reproductive lives. Please vote no on SB 5—it's the only way to protect women's right to access the full range of services they need and deserve.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this critical vote. I would be happy to talk to you further about my experience as a nurse in this field at your convenience. Please feel free to reach me by phone or email.

Sincerely,

Name and Phone/Email

## SAMPLE CALL SCRIPTS

Staffer: "Senator Smith's office, how may I help you?"

### Introduce yourself.

"Hi, my name is Jane Doe. I live in Senator Smith's district and wanted to express my concerns about a bill that's coming up for a vote soon."

- *Note:* The staffer may ask to verify your address or zip code to confirm you are a constituent.

Staffer: "Great, thanks for that information. How can I help you today?"

### Keep your phone call short and simple.

"I oppose (bill name/number) because (2-3 reasons), and I urge (legislator) to vote against this bill."

- *For example:* "I'm calling to urge Sen. Smith to vote no on SB 5, the abortion ban bill. SB 5 is a dangerous bill because it undermines the ability of women and families to make personal and private medical decisions. It also dictates the relationship between health care providers and their patients, putting patients' health at risk. I'm a registered nurse and have seen first-hand the damage that's done when elected officials with little to no medical knowledge dictate how women may—or may not—access reproductive health care and I'd be happy to talk to Senator Smith about my experience in this area."

Staffer: "Thanks for taking the time to call, Jane. I'll be sure to let Senator Smith know your concerns and I'll let her know you're available to talk in more detail about your experiences."

**If you are calling to request information about the legislator's position, your call will likely be transferred to a staff member.** If the staffer doesn't know the legislator's position, politely request a follow-up.

"I am interested in finding out (legislator's name) position on (bill name/number). Would you please call or email me back and let me know? Thank you."

- *For example:* "I got an alert that SB 5, the abortion ban bill, has been scheduled for a hearing in the Senate Health committee. I'm calling to ask whether Senator Smith has taken a position yet on SB 5. Does she support or oppose the bill? [If the staffer isn't sure—] Would you please call or email me and let me know her position on the bill? I really appreciate that, thanks so much."

**If the issue isn't pending, it is still important to be brief and concise in your conversation.** Be prepared to state your position, what you want the legislator to do, and be ready to back up your position with one or two supporting arguments.

"I understand that (bill name/number) might be introduced during this legislative session. I oppose (bill name/number) because (2-3 reasons), and I urge (legislator) to vote against this bill."

- *For example:* "I understand that SB 5, the abortion ban bill, has been reintroduced this session. I called last session to ask Senator Smith to oppose SB 5 and wanted to call early this time to let her know how concerned I am about this bill or any other legislation that aims to restrict abortion access. (Offer 2-3 reasons to oppose the bill). Please ask Senator Smith to vote no on SB 5. And I'd be happy to discuss my experience in this field whenever it's most convenient for Senator Smith. Thanks so much for your time."

*This guide was developed by the ACLU-PA and is updated by Elizabeth Randol, legislative director (erandol@aclupa.org).*