



How Should Local Officials Communicate with Their State & Federal Representatives?

While the LOC works tirelessly to protect and defend the interests of Oregon's 241 cities in both the state Legislature and U.S. Congress, the voice of locally elected officials sometimes has a larger impact on state and federal legislators. When mayors and councilors communicate their support for LOC priorities, it can change the way state and federal legislators vote.

Writing, emailing, calling and face-to-face meetings are all effective ways to communicate your message to elected officials. The following communication tips will assist you in working with state and federal elected officials.

1. How Do I Deliver My Message to State and Federal Elected Officials?

First, and most importantly, get to know your legislators, U.S. Senators and Representatives. This should include getting to know their staff—it's the staff that will help you identify the best way to communicate with the elected officials themselves. Second, calling your elected officials directly is effective when you need to get a message across quickly. Writing your official is also helpful but should be reserved for those instances when the issue you are concerned about does not require an immediate response. Finally, meeting with your elected officials is an essential part of any advocacy effort. Like you, state and federal elected officials have busy schedules. As such, when you do have an in-person meeting with these officials, your message should be concise and quickly delivered. Generally, state and federal elected officials have time for meaningful and lengthy in-person meetings when they are home in their districts or when the Legislature or Congress are not in session.

2. What are the Do's and Don'ts of Calling State and Federal Elected Officials?

When calling state and federal elected officials, the LOC recommends you do six things:

- **Ask to speak with the elected official directly.** If they are not available, ask to speak with the appropriate staff person who is working on the issue. Staff has the elected official's ear and is often very knowledgeable about the details of your issue.

Remember, at times, the elected official's staff may be your greatest ally.

- **Know what you want to say and be concise.** Cover your main points early in the conversation.
- **Leave your name, city and telephone number.** This will make it easier for the elected official's staff to get back to you with the information on the issue.
- **Ask the elected official for their position on the issue.** If you talk with staff, let them know that you need them to get back with you regarding the elected official's position on the issue.
- **Thank them for their time.** Make sure you thank the elected official, or their staff, for the time they've provided you. Ask if you can provide additional information or be helpful in any way. Thanking the official, or staff, for their time should include sending them a short, written thank you note, which includes a concise summary of your position on the issue.

During your conversation with state and federal elected officials, *do not bluff*. If you are asked a question that you cannot answer, advise that you will get back to them and then follow up in a timely manner.

3. What are the Do's and Don'ts of Meeting with State and Federal Elected Officials?

When meeting with state and federal elected officials, LOC recommends you do four things:

- **Call first for an appointment, and ask for the appointment to be with the elected official.** Make sure you call and schedule an appointment; do not just show up at the official's office. When you schedule the appointment, you should explain the purpose of your visit and make it clear that you want to speak directly with the elected official. If the elected official cannot meet with you personally, ask to schedule an appointment with the staff person handling the issue you wish to discuss. It's equally helpful if you make the meeting convenient for the elected official, for example, scheduling it to occur at the official's office.

- **Bring any relevant material with you to the meeting.** Make sure you bring any relevant materials, documents and data with you to meeting. If you have a business card, make sure you bring one and leave it with the official.
- **Be efficient, articulate and respectfully tenacious.** The meeting should be brief and concise. If you are with a group of people, you may want to designate one spokesperson. You should be respectfully tenacious during your conversation, but do not show discouragement or angst. When the meeting concludes, ask the official if they will support or oppose the legislation you have been discussing.
- **Write a thank you note and make sure you follow up.** When the meeting concludes, please make sure you send the elected official or staff a thank you note. Even if the elected official does not support your position, it is still important to thank the official for their time and consideration. Use the thank you note as another opportunity to state your position. Always follow up and make it clear that you will assist in any way you can to make your position understood and supported.

Do not get defensive if the elected official or their staff don't support your position. As an elected official yourself, you understand better than anyone the difficult job state and federal elected officials are doing. Condescending, threatening or intimidating communications will alienate the official and you will need to work with the person again in the future.

4. What are the Do's and Don'ts of Writing or Emailing State and Federal Elected Officials?

When writing or emailing state and federal elected officials, LOC recommends you do four things:

- **Use the correct address and salutation, and make sure there are no typographical or grammatical errors.** Make sure that your salutation identifies the elected official by their appropriate position (Senator, Congresswoman, etc.). Read your letter or email carefully to make sure it is grammatically correct and to ensure it contains no typographical errors.
- **State your position in the first sentence.** You should also include your position in the subject line if you send an email. Make sure to keep your message focused and concise, and identify what it is that you are asking the elected official to do.
- **Use your own words and city stationary.** Form letters are overlooked and discarded. To better ensure your words are read, make sure they are in fact your own words. If you are sending a letter, and your city has stationary, make sure to use said stationary.
- **Know the facts.** Make sure the information you provide is credible. Facts matter. If you can, find out how the elected official voted on this or similar issues in the past.

Do not use a negative tone in your writing. Remember, condescending, threatening or intimidating communications will alienate elected officials – and you will need to work with them again in the future. ■



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