



Communicating with Your Member of Congress

Tips on Writing/E-Mailing Your Senator/Representative

The letter (via U.S. Mail, e-mail, or fax) is still the most popular means of communication with a Congressional office. Below are some useful tips that can help you write the most effective letter possible.

1. State the subject of your letter in the first paragraph.
2. If your issue refers to specific legislation, use the bill number or the name if available. For example, House bill H.R._____; Senate bill S._____.
3. State your position on the bill or issue; whether you support it or oppose it.
4. Explain the issue fully and factually at a level the Senator or Representative will understand.
5. Whenever possible, use local examples of the impact of the issue to make the legislator care.
6. If you live in the Representative's or Senator's district, be sure to mention it.
7. Identify yourself as a member of the Iowa Coalition for Mental Health and Aging.
8. Thank the Senator/Representative for his/her attention to the issue.
9. Let the Senator/Representative know that you are a resource for more information.
10. Ask for a reply.
11. Limit the length of your letter to no more than two pages, one if possible.
12. Clearly type or print your name and return address on your letter in case your envelope gets separated from your letter.

How to Address Correspondence:

To a Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

To a Representative:

The Honorable (full name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Representative (last name):



Tips on Telephoning Your Senator/Representative

When time is short, a personal phone call to legislators, their chief-of-staff or key legislative aides, may be the most effective method to communicate your views. Making a well-timed call can be particularly important. And, especially when combined with calls from your colleagues on the same issue, may tip the balance in your favor. So don't hesitate to call.

1. To locate your Senator's or Representative's phone number call 515-281-3371 or 515-281-3221 and ask to be connected to our Senator's/Representative's office.
2. Ask for the Senator or Representative if you know them personally.
3. If you don't know the Senator or Representative, ask to speak with the legislative assistant who handles your issue. For most issues, that probably will be the legislative assistant who handles health issues.
4. After identifying yourself, tell the aide you would like to leave a brief message, such as: "Please tell Senator/Representative (name) that I support/oppose (S._____/H.R.____)." Clearly state the action you wish your Senator/Representative to take on the issue (vote for, vote against, offer an amendment, etc.).
5. State a reason for your support/opposition to the bill.
6. Ask for your Senator's/Representative's position on the bill.
7. Keep your call brief- no more than three minutes.
8. Leave your name, address, and telephone number. You are more likely to receive a response to your communication, if you are a constituent.
9. If you cannot reach a legislative assistant, leave a concise message. Congressional offices do count the number of calls they receive on an issue (pro and con) and relay that information to the Senator or Representative.
10. Write down the name of the aide to whom you spoke. Next time, you can ask for him or her by name and begin building a relationship. Staffers are more likely to listen to and return phone calls from people they know.



Making an Appointment with Your Member of Congress

- Personal visits with your Senator or Representative are an effective lobbying tool. They often lay the foundation for future contacts. It may take time to arrange a meeting with your Member, so begin early
- To locate a member of the Iowa General Assembly visit <http://www.legis.state.ia.us>
- To schedule an appointment, call your Member's office and ask to speak with the appointment scheduler. Tell him or her you would like to schedule an appointment with the Member. Explain that you would like to discuss mental health and aging issues.
- It is possible that your Senator or Representative will not be able to meet with you. If this occurs, ask if it is possible to meet with a member of your Senator's or Representative's legislative staff. A legislative staff member can be very helpful in assuring that your message reaches your Member.
- Scheduling procedures may differ for each office. Your meeting will probably last between 15 and 30 minutes.



Tips for an Effective Office Visit

1. Be on time for your appointment. If you are even five minutes late, the Member may have gone on with his or her next appointment, you will have started with a bad impression, and your opportunity may very well have been lost.
2. Greet your legislator with a firm handshake, introduce yourself, and present your business card. This helps the Member remember your name.
3. Open the meeting with a comment to establish a tie between the legislator and yourself- e.g., a discussion of mutual friends, common interests in the state, a thank you for a recent hearing, vote, or floor speech.
4. If you are going with a group, decide in advance who will lead the discussion and what points you want to make.
5. Keep your meeting short and simple. Say why you've come and succinctly outline your position.
6. Present your facts in an orderly fashion. Talk about a specific bill, its status, and action you would like the legislator to take. Use our own background and experience to explain your request.
7. Remember to make your explanation relevant to the home district. He or she wants to know how his or her actions impact his or her constituents.
8. Use personal anecdotes and statistics when appropriate. Keep to your schedule and do not go off on a tangent, wasting valuable time. Realize that the Member's staff may interrupt you during the meeting, especially if a vote comes up on the floor and the Member must leave.
9. Because opportunities for personal meetings with the Member are limited, you should always ask for the name of the staff member who handles your issue and indicate that you would like to follow-up with him or her. It is possible that the legislator will ask that staff member to attend the meeting.
10. Be succinct. This may be the most important issue in the world to you, but it is only one of several dozen on your legislator's plate. If you start to ramble on, you will lose your audience in a very short time.
11. Do not become too technical in the examples and background materials you use to justify your position.

12. Answer any questions asked of you, but if you do not know the answer, don't bluff. Tell the legislator that you don't know, but you will get back to him or her promptly with an answer.
13. Leave behind a one- or two-page fact sheet with your Member, summarizing the issue and your position(s), along with the names, telephone number, and email address of contact people.
14. Offer yourself as a resource to the legislator and staff in responding to health care questions.
15. As you conclude the meeting, thank the Member for his or her time. Do not linger, as your Member has other appointments on his or her schedule.
16. Do not be disappointed if you meet with a staff member, rather than the Senator or Representative. Legislators depend on advice from their staff because it is impossible for them to follow all issues themselves. Staff are gatekeepers, and they can sometimes be the real driving force on an issue.
17. Follow up after the meeting with a letter thanking the Member, reiterating your position, and including any information requested during the meeting. If the legislator or staff member should ask for additional materials, respond quickly. By establishing yourself as a reliable source of information, you will improve your access to your legislator.