

VFW Auxiliary Legislative Program

A Guide to Contacting Your Legislators

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As a North Carolina legislative staffer, I have learned a few things about citizen lobbying. Keep the following tips in mind when communicating with your senator or representative.

FINDING YOUR LEGISLATOR

- **Where to look up your Senator or Representative:** Go on the internet and type in the following address: <http://congresslookup.com/>. Once you find your representative and/or senator, write down the physical address of their district office (which will be in your state), the email address, telephone number and fax (if you wish) of the district office and the Washington, D.C. office. Use this contact information to communicate with your legislators. Be sure to check this site after each election. Even if the legislator is re-elected, the office address may have changed.

VISITING YOUR LEGISLATOR

- **Make an appointment:** Legislative offices are extremely busy with many demands for appointments and often chaotic committee meeting schedules, along with sessions where legislation is debated and voted upon. If a staffer is unable to schedule a meeting with the legislator personally, ask to meet with a policy staff member or legislative assistant who will relay your issue and/or concern. If you are able to schedule a meeting with the legislator personally, keep in mind that all such meetings are typically tentative and subject to cancellation should a meeting or session be called that requires the legislator's attendance. Should this happen to you, keep your composure and ask to meet with an available staffer.
- **Be on time and dress appropriately:** Time is a valuable commodity in a legislative office. Please be sure to arrive on time, or even a few minutes early, for your appointment. This will allow you to have the best opportunity to meet for the maximum amount of time. There is no need for professional or Sunday best dress, however business casual attire will show respect for the office and make a positive impression on behalf of the VFW Auxiliary organization.
- **Be respectful to staff:** Staffers often make the decisions as to whom the legislator will meet. Make a friend of the "gatekeeper" and your experience, regardless of whom you may meet, will be much more positive. Never belittle the legislator to their staff!
- **Be prepared:** Make your presentation brief and be as clear and concise as possible. Write down talking points, including specific details you would like to relay, and provide them along with any materials to the legislator or his/her staff after the meeting.
- **Focus on the issue:** Keep your comments focused and specific. These meetings are likely to be brief, so follow your talking points. Should you forget to mention something or follow up is needed, send an email or letter after the meeting.
- **Send a thank you note:** Thank the legislator and his/her staff for arranging and taking the time to meet with you to discuss your concerns. This goes a long way in reinforcing a positive impression of you and our organization with the legislator and his/her staff! Do this as soon as possible after your meeting.

WRITING OR CALLING YOUR LEGISLATOR

- **Be respectful:** Thank the legislator for serving and ask for their help in addressing your concern. Be mindful that often you will not be able to speak to the legislator when calling their office, instead you will be speaking with a staff member who will relay your issue and/or concern.
- **Email is effective:** Email has increased public understanding of what happens in Washington D.C., made members of Congress more responsive to their constituents, and influences the decisions of members of Congress.
- **Personalize your messages:** Staffers pay more attention to personalized messages that don't look like they have been cut and pasted from a letter. It's best to include one or two sentences in a message about yourself, the neighborhood you live in, and the types of organizations, associations, etc., you belong to in the community.
- **Focus on one issue:** Keep your phone calls, letters or emails short and focused on one issue. Personal stories of how you or those you know are affected by government policies add to the effectiveness of your communications. Messages that attempt to persuade, rather than demand, are more likely to be heard. Never belittle the legislator you are addressing!
- **Be specific:** Communications that request a specific action (including a bill number, if available) often have more impact than those that express only a generalized concern. Asking your senators and representatives to "support our veterans" is not as effective as writing to say "Don't vote for the new sequestering legislation, as it will limit access to services for our veterans."

PLANNING AND EXECUTING A PETITION

- **Be accurate and brief:** Thank the legislator for serving and ask for their help in addressing your concern. Be sure to include the bill number and a brief description of the bill or a brief summary of your issue.
- **Identify yourself:** Be certain to identify the organization as the organizer of the petition, especially if you are asking non-members to sign on.
- **Get the right information:** Place all of your descriptive and identifying information at the top of the page and below place three lines across on each row. The first line is for the person to sign their name, second line is for them to print their name and the third line is for their ZIP code.
- **Before You Send It:** Gather all of the pages together and make as many copies as you wish to send, keeping one copy for your file. Staple or secure with a binder clip and place in a large envelope that has been addressed appropriately.
- **The Post Office:** Make sure you have adequate postage by asking the postal clerk to weigh the packet for you. This will ensure proper delivery to the intended recipient.

Legislators want to hear from their constituents. By presenting thoughtful, focused communications you can gain credibility with the member and his/her office staff, which improves your lobbying outcome.

The most important part of communicating with your legislator is to "Just do it!" The VFW and VFW Auxiliary have an incredibly strong presence nationwide as a veterans' service organization and every letter, email, phone call, fax, visit or petition strengthens our voice as we continually fight for services and benefits for our veterans.