



# Pennsylvania Council of Churches

## Tips for Contacting Your Legislators and Decision Makers

These are commonly cited tips gleaned from a number of resources.

### General

- Cultivate a relationship with your legislators. They are more likely to listen if they know you.
- Cultivate a relationship with “staffers” to your legislators and decision makers. They can be valuable in getting your views before them.
- Keep track, to the extent possible, of relevant committee meetings, public hearings, and other opportunities when your actions on issues important to you will have maximum impact.
- Communications should be short, polite, and to the point.
- If there is a specific bill number or common title, it is helpful to identify the issue in that way.
- While it is appropriate in some circumstances to send communications to legislative leaders (majority/minority leaders, committee chairs, etc.), your communications are most effective when sent to your own legislators.
- Be sure to thank legislators and decision makers for their positive response, as well as to express your disappointment with negative responses.
- If you don’t know who your U.S. legislators are:
  - If you don't know your Representative's name: <http://www.house.gov> (upper left, enter zip code)
  - If you don't know your Senators' names: <http://www.senate.gov> (upper right, choose state)
- If you don’t know who your Pennsylvania legislators are:  
<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/home/findyourlegislator/index.cfm#address>

### Letters, Faxes, Personal e-mails

- A page or less is optimal.
- Letters work best when they follow some basic guidelines:
  - Address the recipient by name. Legislators are typically addressed “The Honorable” in the address, and the salutation varies by position. For U.S. and Pennsylvania senators, the salutation should read “Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_.” For the U.S. and Pennsylvania Houses of Representatives, it should read “Dear Representative.” Other salutations depend on the position.<sup>1</sup>
  - Limit your correspondence to one topic, and identify that topic immediately, preferably in a reference line (i.e., “RE: \_\_\_\_\_”).
  - Be polite.
  - State your position (support or opposition), and say why you are advocating for your position. Provide facts, examples, and explain how the legislation or policy will affect you or whatever group(s) you represent. BE SPECIFIC.
  - Reiterate your position.
  - Thank the addressee for his or her attention and cooperation.
  - Include your full name, address, and any other appropriate contact information.

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<sup>1</sup> The President should be addressed as “Dear Mr. President,” the Governor as “Dear Governor \_\_\_\_\_,” mayors as “Dear Mayor \_\_\_\_\_.” When the appropriate salutation is otherwise unknown, a simple “Dear Sir/Madam” or “Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. (etc.) \_\_\_\_\_” is usually appropriate.

- Calling to get the name of a key staff member who is working on the issue you are writing about and sending a copy to that person may enhance the likelihood that your voice will be heard.

**NOTE:** Because of stringent security within the federal mail system (following the anthrax scare in 2001-2002), it may be best to send letters to the district offices of your senators and representative, and/or to fax or e-mail the letter, particularly if the issue is time-sensitive.

Elizabeth Sholes (California Council of Churches' Director of Public Policy) suggests that the following outline is adequate, and offers some comments:

*Dear Official:*

*I represent (your faith tradition, Pennsylvania Council of Churches, etc.).*

*I am concerned about (issue)*

*I want you to do XXXX about this. Thank you.*

*Your signature*

***Comments:*** *If you are pressed for time or unclear about what else to say, that three-line letter is significant in its influence! No prefab letter will ever have the weight of what you can say on your own. If you have more—a personal observation, a reference to a human story, something you read, a Biblical or other passage that pertains and has moved you—then please add that in. Writing to any legislator with a letter of your own creation makes your contribution truly meaningful. **Staff people have told us that legislators' support for issues has changed with as few as 10 original letters—when the weight of dozens of prefab letters and petitions on each side often makes very little impact.***

### **Calling Your Legislators and Decision Makers**

- Be polite.
- Identify yourself to the person answering the phone, letting him or her know that you are a constituent, and noting any appropriate affiliations (faith tradition, judicatory body, Pennsylvania Council of Churches, etc.).
- If your legislator or decision maker is not available (usually the case), ask for an appropriate staff person. If neither is available, you may leave your comments with the person answering the phone.
- State the issue and your position, and comment briefly on why you are advocating for this position.
- Thank the person you are speaking with for listening to/sharing your concerns.

### **Visiting Your Legislators and Decision-Makers**

- Make an appointment to ensure that the legislator/decision maker/critical staff members will be in the office and available to meet with you. Sometimes it is easier and may be more beneficial to meet with the appropriate staff person(s).
- It is often easiest to meet in a district office when the U.S. Congress or the Pennsylvania General Assembly are not in session, so that you will not be competing with hearings, committee meetings, votes, or other demands on your representatives' time.
- Be polite.
- As with letters and other written communications, keep your comments brief and to the point. Following the outline for letters (provided above) is a good rule of thumb.
- Be prepared to leave written information/packets behind to provide additional information—including contact information for persons to respond to questions that may arise.
- Thank the person/persons you have met with for listening to/sharing your concerns.