

EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

WHILE RECENT CHANGES TO AMERICA'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE HAVE USHERED IN A WAVE OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION, THERE ARE MANY WHO, DESPITE WANTING TO BECOME A PART OF THIS NEWLY-ENGAGED CONSTITUENCY, ARE AT A LOSS AS TO EXACTLY HOW THEY CAN BEST ENGAGE WITH THEIR ELECTED OFFICIAL.

If you count yourself among that number, the University of Pittsburgh Elsie Hillman Civic Forum hopes to provide the means to assist you in becoming a productive agent for positive change, as well as to help you understand the positive impact that government can have on the shaping of our society. We have subsequently developed this document for you—someone who wishes to become more politically and respectfully engaged, and who, in order to successfully enact change in your community, would like guidance on how to effectively and courteously communicate with your elected officials.



01 RESEARCH

Researching the issue that you wish to discuss beforehand can greatly enhance the speed and quality of the discussion with your elected official. If you wish to advocate or denounce a specific piece of legislation, make sure to identify the legislation by its name, number, and sponsor. If you wish to talk over a policy issue, be able to briefly articulate the background and arguments surrounding this issue, as well as the action that you would like your elected official to take.

CONNECT

If possible, connect with other community members and/or preexisting groups that are addressing the same issue. Joining together with likeminded community members and making a unified request will more effectively move your cause forward, as the group can serve as a source of support, encourage the pooling of resources and ideas, and call more attention to your efforts.





**“PROVIDING
INFORMATION
AND EDUCATING
US AS STAFFERS
OR LAWMAKERS
ON THE ISSUE THAT
YOU CARE ABOUT
IS EXTREMELY
HELPFUL.”**

Ryan Morden, Legislative Assistant
at State Representative Dan Frankel's district office

02

IDENTIFY THE CORRECT ELECTED OFFICIAL



Another benefit of researching your issue beforehand is that you will have the opportunity to identify whether your issue should be addressed on the local, state, or federal level.

CONDITIONAL INCLUSION: You're in danger of having your water shut off? You can contact your state representative. Having problems with your neighborhood's parking meters? You should look to city government. There's been a delay with your visa? That's a federal issue.

After you've identified the local, state, or federal elected official who has the means to address your issue, engage in one more round of last-minute research: find out what, if any, position your elected official has taken on the issue at hand. Do they support your position? Have they expressed reservations about upcoming pieces of legislation? Do they outright object to your viewpoint? If so, why? Is it because of their background? Their ties to local organizations? The sources of their campaign contributions?

Regardless of their stance, research thoroughly; while it may be tempting to simply write off opposition, understanding where your elected official is coming from and why they feel the way they do will make your arguments more effective and your conversation more constructive.



“YOU NEED TO RESEARCH YOUR ISSUE AND DETERMINE IF IT’S IN THE SCOPE OF STATE GOVERNMENT. 15-20% OF CALLERS WERE ASKING SOMETHING OF OUR OFFICE OR OF THE SENATOR THAT WAS NOT IN THE SCOPE OF HER AUTHORITY.”

Dorothy Staffen, District Administrator
at State Senator Kim Ward’s district office

03 PLAN YOUR MESSAGE

Before meeting with or calling your elected official, it might be helpful to plan out what you want to communicate. Clearly plan out your message using the following format:



Confirm that you are a constituent by stating your name and where you live.



Write down:

1. The issue you want to discuss
2. What is your position on that issue
3. What action you would like your elected official to take



Stress how the issue will affect the legislator’s district or state.



Tell a personal story that highlights why you care about it.

Even if you’re meeting with your elected official face-to-face, don’t be afraid to read what you’ve prepared straight from a printout—you’ve done your research and formed a strong argument supporting your position, and that will show regardless of whether you’ve memorized a script or not.

04

CHOOSE YOUR COMMUNICATION METHOD



EMAILS + PHONE CALLS

For those who are unable to visit their elected official's office, phone calls can be a quick, easy, and effective way to either express your support/objection on a policy issue, or to follow up on previous communications. When calling your elected official's office, ask to be directed to a staff member who has been tasked with handling the matter. If you're asked to leave a voicemail, follow your call up with an email to ensure that the office gets back to you.



LETTERS

While elected officials' offices do attempt to respond to every constituent, the very nature of letters and emails can result in slower response rates; therefore, sending letters and emails to your elected officials might be a method best suited to low-priority issues, or issues that do not require an immediate response. Letters are also the best method when you wish to send your legislator an invitation to an event, or when you want to thoroughly address an issue (which might require a lengthier explanation than a phone call would be appropriate for).



SOCIAL MEDIA

While elected officials' social media usage varies from person to person, there are many legislators who frequently use platforms like Twitter and Facebook to engage with their constituents. Using social media, you can instantly make your argument viewable to not only your elected official, but to all of your elected official's followers.

ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS

In-person meetings with your elected official are one of the most effective ways to emphasize your interest in a particular issue. Every elected official has a local or district office that is open to the public. District offices provide constituents the opportunity to meet with state and federal elected officials without having to travel to the state capital or D.C. If you are able try to schedule your appointment beforehand with your elected official's office

Making an appointment will drastically increase your chances of meeting with your elected official personally; however, walk-ins are also accepted at all public offices. Politely ask to meet with your elected official directly upon arrival. In the case that your elected official is not in and you end up meeting with a staffer, keep in mind that building relationships with your elected official's staff (particularly staff members who handle the specific issues you want to discuss) can be just as important as meeting with the elected official themselves. Staffers play an invaluable role in shaping an elected official's agenda and position on issues, so cultivating a public working relationship with staffers can be the difference between success and failure.

TIPS

1

Put your best image forward.

2

Introduce yourself, and start your conversation with a compliment.

3

After you explain your position, politely listen to your elected official's response.

4

Don't answer what you don't know.

5

Cultivate a relationship with your elected official's staff.

6

Bring a brief fact sheet that outlines your position and supporting research, and give it to the elected official at the end of your meeting.

7

Thank your elected official for their time.

COMMUNICATION METHODS



PHONE CALLS + EMAILS

To express your support or objection to a piece of legislation

To follow up on previous communications



LETTERS

For low-priority issues or issues that do not require an immediate response

To send an invitation to an event

To address a complex issue in a thorough, well-crafted way



SOCIAL MEDIA

For when you want an immediate response (although your mileage may vary depending on how often your elected official uses social media)



ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS


To ensure that you've comprehensively gotten your message across

To create a dialogue with your elected official and give you the chance to immediately ask follow-up questions

To communicate your personal take and to allow your elected official to put a name and face to

To build relationships with your elected official and their staff

05 FOLLOW-UP



After you've politely and effectively communicated your position, get the contact information of the specific person that you spoke to. Follow up on your conversation by calling or emailing the elected official or staff member. Thank them for agreeing to speak with you, and ask for updates on your representative's position, actions, or resolutions on the issue. Continue to follow up with your elected official's office in a respectful manner as needed, based on the issue. Follow ups can include visiting the elected official's website and social media, further research of your issue, monitoring legislation updates, and corresponding with the elected official and staff.



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