Effective Communication With a Legislator

As a citizen, one of your greatest responsibilities is to help elect the legislators who represent you. However, voting is only the beginning of your role in the democratic process. By sharing your opinions and ideas with your state, or U.S. Representatives and Senators, you help them decide what to do about the pending issues and legislation. Legislators can't possibly know the ins and outs of every issue they vote on, so whoever gives them the most feedback carries a lot of sway. They value your suggestions and encourage you to express them. Think about becoming a known, trusted resource for a legislator and their legislative aide on the nutrition profession, rather than just showing up at “bill time.”

Legislators receive a huge volume of phone calls and mail from constituents. Unfortunately, their full agendas limit their ability to personally respond to them all. To be sure your voice is heard, here are some tips to help you get the most impact out of your communication with legislators.

**General Tips**

- Know who your legislators are and how to contact them. If you aren’t sure who represents you, find out by going to OpenStates.org or OpenCongress.org. You can then click on your legislator’s name to get his or her contact information, committee membership, sponsored legislation and more.
- Review how the legislative process works. Understanding how an idea becomes a law will help you effectively have input in the process. State processes vary, so go to your state’s legislative page for specific information.
- Contact your legislator about a particular issue before the Legislature takes action on it. In other words, take time to visit with your legislator to let him or her know about your work and what legislative issues are important to you. Demonstrate your value to them as a resource on professional issues.
- If you are unsure where a bill is in the process, you can visit OpenStates.org or OpenCongress.org to find out.
- There are many phases a bill must go thru before it becomes law. It’s important to follow a bill’s movement and to communicate to the appropriate parties at each stage—it’s not a one-time effort.
- Use a variety of communication methods. You might choose to contact your legislator by phone, letter, email, social media or by visiting in person.
- Give testimony at public hearings held by your legislature. Check your state’s legislative page to understand the procedures unique to your state. Check your state page on NutritionAdvocacy.org for talking points on specific bills. Often, legislators will want to ask questions after your testimony, so be prepared.
- Be concise, yet specific. Tell your legislator what effect you think a particular issue or bill, if it becomes law, will have on you, your children, business or community. Also, suggest a course of action and offer assistance.
- Be courteous, even if you disagree strongly with the legislator you are addressing. The Legislature is an institution where people on opposite sides of issues have an opportunity to engage in thoughtful debate. Also, if you identify yourself as a member of an organization, your demeanor leaves an impression of the organization as well.
Writing Effective Letters
Address letters to members of the Legislature as follows:

The Honorable John or Jane Doe
State Senator, District #
The Capitol
City, State Zip

• Use the right address and spell your legislator's name correctly. Type or print legibly. Sign your name neatly and give your address correctly so the legislator can respond to your letter. Make sure to re-read and edit your letter before sending it. It’s also okay to email an attached letter; if you do, convert it to a PDF file before sending. If you attach a letter, write a brief sentence in the email to which it is attached, (e.g. Please find my comments attached regarding (bill number and name)). Instead of attaching a letter, you can also write a brief letter in the body of an email.
• Keep letters, emails and faxes as brief as possible. Concisely written correspondence is more likely to grab and keep the reader’s attention.
• Identify your issue or opinion at the beginning of the letter; don’t bury your main point.
• Use the subject line to state the bill number and your position such as: SB 345 Oppose as Written.
• Cover only one issue per letter. If you have another issue to address, write another letter.
• Back up your opinions with supporting facts. Your letter should inform the reader, and facts make an argument more tangible and convincing.
• Avoid abbreviations and acronyms, and don’t use technical jargon.
• Personalized letters have a greater impact, but if you need to get letters to multiple legislators on the same bill, that can be time-consuming. Try including a sentence or two that may resonate with them specifically, or make a different point. And make sure to make the letter out to the correct recipient!

Calling or Visiting Your Legislator
• Plan your call or visit ahead of time. When preparing to visit your legislator, make an appointment. Call or write to schedule the meeting as soon as you know when you are going to be at the Capitol. This way, you can be sure you will be able to meet with your legislator.
• While meeting directly with your legislator is preferable, if your legislator is not available when you plan to be at the Capitol, see if you can meet with their legislative aide instead.
• It’s often possible, and more convenient, to meet with your legislator when he or she is in district, especially when the legislature is on break.
• Keep to the point and discuss only one issue. Organizing your thoughts ahead of time and making notes to help you stay on track can be very helpful.
• Prepare a one-page fact sheet about the issue to give to your legislator. This will help him or her better retain what you present.
• Bring a colleague or two with you; you can each focus on different points and it takes the pressure off any one person. Be sure to let the legislator’s office know ahead of time how many people are coming.