

Communicating With Elected Officials

Communications isn't just about sending a press release. Or making a phone call. Or responding to an e-mail. It's about all of that, and more. As important as "what" you do, "how" you do it will make a huge difference. Below are some quick tips on how best to be heard.

Letters

Short of a face-to-face meeting, letters and other written personal communications may be your most effective communication tool. Below are some tips on sending faxes and e-mail.

Tips for Effective Letter Writing

- Write to the legislators who represent your health center and to the legislators who represent the district where you live.
- Limit your letter to one page.
- A single, well-written letter from a well-known constituent may be more likely to influence a legislator's decision than an avalanche of post cards.
- Modify sample letters provided to you to deliver your own unique message.
- Fax or e-mail your letter if the time frame for action is short.
- Give your credentials when appropriate.
- Avoid personal criticism.
- Express appreciation for past or future support.
- Ask the legislator to send you a letter stating his/her position on the issue.
- Send a copy of your letter to KAMU, 1129 S. Kansas Ave. Suite B Topeka, KS 66612 or **E-mail** Connie Hubbell, chubbell@kspca.org , so she can coordinate our lobbying activities with your grassroots efforts.

Phone Calls

When time is short, nothing works like a quick phone call to the office of key legislators. Your call is most likely to get attention if you have a personal relationship with the legislator. A well-timed call can be especially influential when combined with calls from colleagues on the same issue.

- Ask for the senator or representative.

- If you can't reach a legislator, leave a concise message. State legislative offices do count the number of calls they receive on an issue - pro and con - and relay that information to the senator or representative.
- Focus on a single issue, making two or three key points in your phone call.
- Have talking points to stay focused on the message you want to deliver. KAMU often will provide you with talking points when they ask you to communicate with the Legislature.
- Show the impact on the legislator's constituents.
- Clearly state the action you support.
- Keep your call brief, not more than three or four minutes.
- Don't bluff if you don't know the answer to a question. Tell them you'll get the answer and get back to them.
- Leave your name and telephone number.
- Send a thank you note!

Meeting With Your Legislators

Face-to-face meetings are the most effective method of communicating. When the Legislature is in session, it is best to meet in Topeka. To control travel costs and introduce the legislator to the work you do locally, try to arrange a visit to your clinic when the legislature is not in session.

Requesting A Meeting

- Contact the senator's or representative's Topeka office and ask to speak with their secretary.
- Explain whom you represent and the reason you want a meeting with the senator or representative.
- If you are inviting the legislator to visit your clinic, send a letter of invitation from the CEO and/or board chairman (or a board member who has a personal relationship with the legislator).
- Send the letter to the office recommended by the secretary.

Tips for Conducting An Effective Office Visit

- Introduce yourself and any others in your group, stating where you are from and what clinic you represent.
- If you are going with a group, decide in advance who will lead the discussion and what points you want to make.
- Keep your meeting short and simple. Say why you've come and succinctly outline the case for your position on a particular piece of legislation or the issues that prompted your meeting.

- Give examples of how the issue affects your health center and the senator's or representative's constituents.
- Stay focused on the two or three key messages you want to leave with the legislator. It is easy to get off-track and run out of time, particularly when dealing with seasoned politicians.
- Answer any questions asked of you. If you don't know the answer, don't bluff. Say you don't know the answer, but will find out and get back to them.
- Leave behind a one-page position paper on your issues. Include your name and telephone number.
- Offer yourself as a resource to the legislator and the staff in responding to health care questions.
- Be prompt but be patient if the legislator is running late. They have full schedules.
- Don't be disappointed if you end up meeting with staff, 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.

Tips for Conducting an Effective Safety Net Clinic Visit

- Extend the length of the meeting to include a brief tour of two or three important patient care areas of the health center. (Allot about one to one-and-half hours for a tour, plus a "sit-down" meeting.) Choose areas that demonstrate the impact of your health center on the health of constituents. Walk the tour yourself in advance to make sure everything is in order and that you deliver your intended message.
- Provide opportunities for the senator or representative to meet key clinic staff — a physician, a board member who knows the legislator, and an employee such as a nurse or social worker who works directly with patients. Inform participants in advance so they can be prepared.
- Prepare a fact sheet on your clinic to give to the senator or representative. Include information such as: number of patients served, number of staff, employees and volunteers, amount of indigent care provided, Medicare and Medicaid patient load, etc.
- Notify KAMU about the planned visit. KAMU can provide you with background information on the senator or representative and help you compile any statistics or information needed to illustrate your concerns.
- Make arrangements to photograph the legislator's visit and include a story on the visit in your center's publications. Send the senator or representative copies of the stories. If local press coverage is desirable, coordinate solicitation of coverage with the legislator's press secretary.

Follow-up After the Meeting

- Send a note thanking the legislator and briefly restating your issue. Include any follow-up information that was promised.
- Provide feedback on your meeting to KAMU so that they may adjust their lobbying strategies, if needed.

Get To Know Congressional Staff

Building a good working relationship with congressional staff is as important as developing a relationship with your senator or representative. It's easier to reach and speak with staff. Staff members play a key role in helping legislators reach decisions.

Staff people may know a lot, or nothing, about safety net clinic issues. If the legislator sits on key committees responsible for health care, someone on their staff is likely to focus on health care. Other legislative staff may juggle health care with other issues

The level of expertise also may vary, depending on where the staff person works – in Topeka or in one of the district offices or in Washington D. C. While district office staff are usually not experts on legislation, they should still be included in your outreach. They are the eyes and ears for the legislator on how issues are playing back home.