

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Legislative Terms

Petition

A request to a public official that seeks to correct a wrong or to influence public policy. Informal citizen petitions usually include a statement of what should be done and signatures of friends, neighbors, or others showing support for this position.

Public Hearing

Public discussion and testimony on a bill which may be scheduled by a committee.

Citizen participation is an essential component of any democratic government. In order to be true representatives of the people, legislators need input and feedback from their constituents on important issues.

Many people never have any contact with those who represent them in government—whose vote may decide what price they will pay for the acts of government, sometimes in terms of dollars, or in changes to standards of living, or in regulatory inconveniences. As a citizen, *you* can help ensure good legislation on the state and national levels by communicating with your elected representatives at the proper time.

IS THERE A BILL OR AN ISSUE OF PARTICULAR CONCERN TO YOU? CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATORS!

People often think that contacting their state legislators will not have any effect. On the contrary, legislators are very interested in what the public has to say. They are glad to hear from individuals in their district and see dialogue with the public as one of their primary objectives while in office. This section outlines how to effectively communicate with your state lawmakers.

Communications with the people of their districts are more important than ever to modern-day legislators. The job requires long hours of study on complicated issues before the Legislature, as well as numerous committee meetings and lengthy sessions. Because of busy schedules and the need to travel between Lansing and their district, most members of the Legislature often are unable to talk one-on-one with all of their

constituents. However, there are other effective ways to contact public officials. Traditional letters, e-mails, and even social media can be highly effective tools to let public officials know what you think.

A thoughtful, factual, and timely letter or e-mail written to a legislator can solidify or cause a serious review of a previous judgment on an issue. Social media, like Facebook or Twitter, provides an easy way to engage public officials. Hearing from their constituents gives legislators a better understanding of issues and of public opinion.

If you are interested in becoming actively involved in influencing legislation, here are some important points that will make your lobbying efforts more effective:

PERSONAL CONTACTS

Personal contacts can be a meaningful way to influence a legislator.

1. **Before contacting any legislators**, take the time to read all available background material on the bill or issue which concerns you. Although it is obviously beneficial for you to know a great deal about the specifics of bills and issues, it is not essential that you know everything. The primary goal of your visit is to express your concern over a particular bill or issue.

2. **Know when and where** to contact a legislator. The best times to find a legislator in the office in Lansing are Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. (House sessions are normally held on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 1:30 p.m. and Thursdays at 12:00 noon, while Senate sessions normally begin at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.)

Occasionally, legislators will be able to see you if you simply walk into their office, but the best approach is to call ahead and make an appointment. Let the legislator know what you wish to discuss. If you cannot get an appointment, or if the matter is too urgent to wait for an appointment, do not hesitate to go to the office anyway. You may at least be able to talk to staff, and will have made them aware of your concern.

3. **If you have genuine expert knowledge**, share it with the legislator. It will be welcomed. No legislator can be an expert on everything. (All views are important, but expertise is especially valued. Remember, any lobbyist's most useful role for a legislator is as a source of information.) If you have read the bill carefully and/or understand the issues involved as a result of personal knowledge or research, you may be of great assistance to the legislator.

4. **Be constructive.** If a bill deals with a problem you admit exists, but you believe the bill is the wrong approach, explain what you believe is the right approach. If you want to suggest amendments to a bill that has been introduced, it is important that you have: a) a clear idea of what you want to be included or deleted; b) the reasons to justify the proposed change; and c) good, strong facts to back up your position before you contact your legislator. If possible, leave copies of your position and/or suggested changes with the legislator.

5. **You do not** need a crowd to lobby. One, or possibly two, well-informed people on the same subject are more effective and less confusing than a large group gathered at the same time.

6. **When you introduce yourself**, save time by making it clear who you are and what organization, if any, you are working with. If you are cooperating with some group from the legislator's home district, mention it and the fact that the home district group may also be trying to reach the legislator.

7. **Do not** "overkill." Most legislators have many demands on their time. An elaborate sales job or long, emotional speech will not always be appreciated. They do, however, want your well-prepared facts and views, presented in a straightforward manner. Make sure their time is well spent in talking to you. Stick to the issues that you came to discuss; don't wander into other issues.

8. **It is easy**, particularly when dealing with legislators who disagree with you, to become angry and frustrated. If you disagree, a calm, reasonable attitude and a set of well-prepared reasons for your position may change their minds on the issue.

Let legislators explain their views—listen without interrupting—they often have input from many resources to which you may not have access, such as fiscal agencies, state departments, other groups with expertise on the issue, and legislation from other states.

Take a few notes about their comments, noting any questions they have. Give the answers you know, and offer to get answers to the other questions, if possible. Understanding their views of the facts and where they come from will help your organization develop counterarguments.

9. **Give your legislator** a fair chance to examine all sides of an issue.

The legislative process is very complex, and bills change their shape in committee and on the floor of both chambers of the Legislature. A bill rarely becomes law in the same form as introduced. It is possible that the bill you supported originally is so changed in the process that you would oppose its final form.

A legislator may be forced to vote on a complex bill as a whole, weighing the good with the bad and the needs of all constituents and the state as a whole, rather than those of a particular group or individual.

LETTER WRITING AND E-MAIL

A personal letter or message via e-mail or the Internet may be the most effective way of contacting your legislator, whether in Lansing or Washington, D.C. Many offices prefer e-mail.

If you're new at this type of letter writing, here are some suggestions on how your letters can be most effective:

1. **Address it properly:** Know your legislator's full name and correct spelling. For specific addresses, see individual lists. Examples:
2. **Always include your last name and address on the letter or e-mail.** A letter cannot be answered if there is no return address and this shows you are a constituent.



A well-written letter or e-mail is usually the best way to communicate concerns and ideas to a legislator.

Letter Writing

U.S. SENATOR
The Honorable (full name)
United States Senator
Address

Dear Senator (last name):

STATE SENATOR
The Honorable (full name)
State Senator
State Capitol
P.O. Box 30036
Lansing, MI 48909-7536

Dear Senator (last name):

U.S. REPRESENTATIVE
The Honorable (full name)
United States Representative
Address

Dear Representative (last name):

STATE REPRESENTATIVE
The Honorable (full name)
State Representative
State Capitol
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48909-7514

Dear Representative (last name):

3. **Use your own words.** Avoid form letters and petitions. They tend to be identified as organized pressure campaigns and are often answered with form replies. However, a petition *does* let the legislator know that the issue is of concern to a large number of people (addresses with zip codes should be given for each signature). One thoughtful, factual, and well-reasoned letter may carry more weight than 100 form letters or printed postcards.

4. **Time the arrival of your letter or e-mail.** Try to write to your legislator, and the chairperson of the committee dealing with a bill, while a bill is still in

committee and there is still time to take effective action. Sometimes a bill is out of committee, or has been passed, before a helpful, informative letter arrives which *could* have made a difference in the way the bill was written or in the final decision.

5. **Know what you are writing about.** Identify the bill or issue of concern to you. Thousands of bills and resolutions are introduced in each session. If you write about a bill, try to give the bill number or describe it by popular title, such as "the Whistleblower's Act" or "the School Code."

6. **Be reasonably brief.** Many issues are complex, but a single page, presenting your opinions, facts, arguments, or proposals as clearly as possible, is preferred and welcomed by most legislators.

7. **Give reasons for your position.** Explain how the issue would affect you, your family, business, or profession—or the effect on your community or our state. If you have specialized knowledge, share it with your legislator. Concrete, expert arguments for or against the bill can be used by the legislator in determining the final outcome of a bill.

8. **Be constructive.** If a bill deals with a problem you admit exists, but you believe the bill is the wrong approach, explain what you believe to be the right approach.

9. **Groups and individuals should determine their priority concerns** and contact the legislator on those *specific* issues rather than on *every* issue.

10. **You may not always receive a long, detailed response.** Legislators are very busy and usually cannot respond with long, personal replies to each correspondent.

11. **Write to express appreciation** when you feel a legislator has done a good job. Legislators are human too and seldom receive “thank you” letters of encouragement.

Remember, on any one issue, even a few letters or e-mails to one legislator can have an important impact. Sometimes just one letter or e-mail, with a new perspective, or with clear-cut, persuasive arguments, can be the decisive factor in a legislator’s action.

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If you decide you want to be further involved in the future of a particular bill, keep track of the bill. Consider testifying on it before a committee. (Information on testifying is included in the section on “Committees.”) There may also be a public hearing on it in your area.