

Organizing Nuts & Bolts

Tips on talking with your legislators

from the Virginia Organizing Project

Editor's note: This column is a new feature of the Western Organizing Review. For more information about the Virginia Organizing Project, including a series of "Organizing Toolbox" articles, see www.virginia-organizing.org.



Be personal.

Tell how your concerns about a piece of legislation relate to your personal situation, your neighbors or people you know. Also, let them know quickly if you live in his/her legislative district.

Let them know you are part of an organizational effort. Effective groups can get a lot done and most legislators pay more attention to strong organizations than they do one or two individuals.

Do some homework.

Try to know the basics of the legislation you are talking about; think about what points you want to make; think about what arguments are probably going to be brought up against your point of view. Connect the talking points of your issue to a personal story.

Be focused.

Stay on the subject you're concerned about. Don't stray, and don't let the legislator change the subject. Be polite, but firm.

Don't be argumentative.

Even if it would make you feel good, little is gained by badgering a legislator or getting into a verbal fight. Persuasion is the key – firmly press home your points and your needs, reminding the legislator how it personally affects you.

Don't be defensive.

Legislators may make some critical remarks about your position or ask some tough questions. Give them solid information on your position to make your points more credible. Keep in mind that the legislative process often involves compromises, but you always have a right to be part of the process. Your situation and your needs are important. That attitude will keep you stating those needs and problems firmly, not defensively.

Don't stay too long, don't be rude or threatening, don't make an enemy.

You need to establish a long-term relationship with the legislator. Even if you disagree on an issue, you may find that he/she will work with you on another issue later.

Get a commitment.

The goal is to enlist the legislator's support, so be specific. "Will you vote for this bill in committee?" "Will you help us keep the stronger sections in the bill when it gets to the Senate floor?" Ask the question directly and try to get a direct answer.

Be optimistic and upbeat.

Legislators are quick to pick up the personal energy that goes with citizen lobbying efforts.

Follow up promptly.

Send a thank you note and anything else you promised to send.