



TIPS FOR SHARING YOUR VIEWS WITH POLICYMAKERS

Letters, phone calls, and personal contact

These are the primary ways the person who represents you in Congress, in the Washington legislature, on the county commission, or on the city council or township board can learn about how YOU feel on a particular issue. Elected officials, particularly at the state or federal level, frequently mention that it is rare to receive even a dozen letters from individual citizens about important issues.

Here are some suggestions for making YOUR voice heard by the people who represent you in Washington, in Olympia, and in your local government.

- Contact your own legislator. Public officials pay the most attention to the people who elect them. If you aren't sure who represents you, contact the county or city clerk. Try to share your views with the person at the right level of government (e.g., if it is a federal issue, then contact your U.S. Representative and your two U.S. Senators).
- Be polite, even if you disagree with the views of this elected official.
- If the final vote doesn't turn out the way you'd like, don't give up on sharing your views. Continue to look for ways to help your legislators understand YOUR experiences.

When is the best time to share your views?

The legislative process in a democracy may seem slow and "messy." There is all that debate, discussion, and difference of opinion! Those annoying features actually protect our rights as citizens. Debate and discussion provide the opportunity for citizens to share views at several points in the process. YOU can influence legislation at many stages:

- Suggesting ideas for bills. This may mean sharing an idea for a new program or telling about a problem with an existing law.
- Sharing your experiences and opinions with your elected official about a bill that is under discussion in committee or by the entire city council, county commission, legislature or congress.
- Expressing your opinion about how a law is being carried out. Your elected representative can help you connect with the appropriate agency.

What is the best way to share your concerns?

The answer really is that there is no best way! The main point is to do it! Choose whatever method works for you at a particularly point in time. It is important that your government officials know your side of the story and how the proposed action affects YOU.

Share your views with policymakers by:

Writing Letters or Sending Email

- Write about one issue. Keep it brief.

- Make it personal. Describe your own experience. Talk about how a particular decision or action affects (or will affect) YOU.
- The letter can be hand-written but it needs to be easy to read.
- Give your address and sign your name clearly
- It needs to be in your own words. (Form letters are generally ignored.)
- If you are using email, be sure to include your name and address so that it is clear that you are writing to your own legislator.

Making Phone Calls

- This is a useful way to quickly share an opinion on an issue, particularly a yes or no message just prior to a legislative vote.
- Plan your message in advance. Make it very brief.
- Call the office of the elected official. Leave the message with a staff person.
- Follow up with a letter if you would like to share more details.

Talking With Elected Officials

- Make an appointment to talk with the elected official in his/her office. Be prepared to share your views briefly and clearly.
- Tell why the issue is important to you. Explain your concerns. Outline your experiences.
- Always be polite. Listen to the views of the elected official, even if you disagree.
- Stick to the one issue under discussion.
- If you see your elected official at a public event, it may be appropriate to briefly mention your concerns about a particular issue. However, it is important to be VERY brief. Follow up with a letter or phone call.

Get Involved

- Participate in public meetings
- Give testimony at a public hearing
- Sign petitions

Make YOUR Voice Heard!

Adapted from Michigan State University Extension 2003

*Note to WSU Extension faculty and staff. It is perfectly OK to share your ideas, concerns, etc. with the policy makers. However, you should not be doing this as a representative of WSU unless you have contacted the WSU legislative liaison. It is not appropriate to use your WSU email signature, WSU letterhead, WSU telephone to communicate personal concerns or view to policy makers.