

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR LEGISLATORS



As a Tennessean, one of your greatest responsibilities is to help elect the legislators who represent you and the state's nearly 6 million other residents. But your role in the democratic process of government does not end at the polls. By sharing your opinions and ideas with your senators and representatives in Nashville, you help them decide what to do about the issues and pending legislation that affect us all. They value your suggestions and encourage you to express them.

Your state senator and representative receives a large volume of phone calls and mail from their constituents. How then, can you be sure your voice is heard? Here are some tips to help you get the most impact out of your communications with your state legislators in Nashville.

GENERAL TIPS

- Know who your state senator is and how to contact them. If you don't know who represents you, you can find out by using the *Find Your Legislator* button on the Members section of the Senate's web page or you can contact your county's Administrator of Elections.
- The General Assembly's web site <http://www.legislature.state.tn.us/> will give you the mailing addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of Tennessee's state legislators.
- Make sure you understand the legislative process. Even the most basic understanding of the process will help you effectively express your ideas.
- Contact your senator/representative about a particular issue before the Legislature takes action on it. Most matters coming before the Legislature are well publicized before and during session. Calendars for committee and floor action are posted on the General Assembly's web site and updated frequently.
- You can use a variety of communication methods. You might choose to telephone, write, e-mail, fax, or visit your legislator.
- Tell your senator what effect you think a particular bill, if it becomes law, will have on you, your children, business, or community. Be concise, but specific.
- Be polite, even if you disagree strongly with the senator you are addressing. Lawmakers cannot please everyone. Your communication will be more effective if you are reasonable in your approach.
- Suggest a course of action and offer assistance. Don't make promises or threats.

WRITING EFFECTIVE LETTERS

- Be absolutely certain you spell your legislator's name correctly and use the correct address. If you don't, you could lose your audience.
- Type or print legibly. Sign your name neatly and give your address correctly so your legislator can respond to your letter.
- Keep letters, e-mail, and faxes brief. Never write more than one page. Concise 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 under trivial text.
- 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.
- Avoid abbreviations or acronyms, and don't use technical jargon. Rather than impressing your reader, such terms will only frustrate him or her.
- Don't send the same letter to more than one legislator. Personalized letters have more impact.

CALLING OR VISITING YOUR LEGISLATOR

- Plan your call or visit carefully. Keep to the point and discuss only one issue. Organize your thoughts ahead of time and make notes to help you stay on track.
- When planning to visit your legislator, make an appointment. Don't just drop by the legislator's office and expect him or her to drop everything to see you. Call or write for an appointment as soon as you know when you are going to be at the Capitol.
- Prepare a one-page fact sheet concerning your issue to give to your legislator. This will help him or her better retain what you present.