

Americans For Safe Access

AN ORGANIZATION OF MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS, SCIENTISTS, AND PATIENTS HELPING PATIENTS

THE ABCS OF CITIZEN ADVOCACY A GUIDE FOR MEDICAL CANNABIS ACTIVISTS



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A GUIDE FOR MEDICAL CANNABIS ACTIVISTS

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The ABCs of Citizen Advocacy

It is natural to feel intimidated about contacting your elected officials. But the strength and power politicians have is derived directly from their constituents. Legislators are elected to represent your views, and they appreciate hearing from their constituents.

The Basics

ACCURATE. Medical marijuana is just one of many issues your legislator is concerned with at any given time. Make certain that the information you are providing is direct and accurate. Never lie or provide inaccurate information. If you don't know something, be honest about it. You can always locate the correct information after the meeting and use that as an excuse to follow up in the future.

BRIEF. In most cases, you will have a limited amount of time to make your pitch. Keep it short, and keep it simple! It is extremely difficult to relay ten pieces of information in three minutes. It is even more difficult to comprehend ten pieces of information in three minutes. Thus, it is vital that advocates think

carefully about two or three main talking points they hope to communicate - and stick to these points throughout your advocacy.

COURTEOUS. Whether you agree or disagree with your legislator it is important that you maintain some level of respect. Your goal as an advocate is to create a safe space for your legislator so that tough choices can be made with confidence. It is important that you go out of your way to be a positive resource for your legislator. Be punctual and patient. Don't lie or exaggerate. Don't argue or raise your voice. Don't be rude or obnoxious.

DO FOLLOW-UP. Be proactive and responsive. Follow up your meeting with a thank-you letter that outlines the various topics covered during the meeting, reiterates any commitments your legislator made, and includes any additional information or materials requested during the meeting. Also, you should use this opportunity to accurately communicate any information you didn't readily have available or didn't know during the course of your meeting.

Tactical Tips for Advocates

When communicating with your legislators, do not feel that it is your responsibility to be a "know-it-all". A few short position statements about why you support or oppose a specific piece of legislation will suffice.

Always give your legislator your name, address, and telephone number so that they know you are one of their constituents. Be sure to include this information whether you visit in person, call, or write. Most importantly, be accurate, brief and courteous when communicating with your legislators. Remember, legislators are people, too!

Timing is very important.

If the legislation you are concerned about is imminent, contacting your legislator quickly by phone or e-mail can be very effective. However, if you have time, take advantage of other influential tactics, such as writing a letter, attending a city or county council meeting, placing a phone call to your legislator's office or meeting directly with your elected leaders. The key is to use timing to your advantage with each tactic you use.

Develop a Relationship.

Relationships are necessary in order to influence change. Advocacy is the development and maintenance of an on-going conversation to promote your position. An advocate's job is to develop a working relationship with your elected officials and

the staffers who are assigned to work on your issue. When it comes time for action, knowing someone to call will pay off. The key is to develop a network that can make your position heard.

Voice Your Position and Ask for Action!

Legislators frequently act on behalf of their constituency. Even if your legislator does not currently support your position it can be extremely helpful to contact them on a regular basis. Make your concerns vocal, and always ask for your legislator for an action.

Know the Issue. Legislators have several issues they are concerned with at any given time. Make certain that you are relaying concise and accurate information. Prepare and distribute information based on sound, scientific research. Ask questions about your legislator's feelings toward a particular issue, and be ready for your legislator to ask you questions about your position.

Listen & Share Information.

It is very important to listen to your legislators. Really understand what their positions are and why. Relay any information you receive from your legislator to the members of your organization, community, family and friends. Information helps to shape future talking points and also helps to broaden the audience.

Do's and Don'ts

THE DON'TS

Lie or exaggerate

Waste time

Be a know-it-all

Make promises you can't deliver

Be argumentative

Burn bridges

THE DO'S

Relay accurate information

Make your arguments brief

Be courteous, punctual and patient

Make yourself a resource

Choose 2 or 3 main talking points, and stick to 'em!

Ask for a specific action

Use time wisely

Listen & share information

Follow up: always write a thank-you note

Visiting Your Legislator

PLAN YOUR MEETING

Create a detailed plan. Decide who is going to be present at the meeting. For example: just yourself; or, you and a few other constituents; or, you and representatives from a particular organization. Also, decide who, apart from your legislator might be present at the meeting, like a staff person.

Schedule an appointment. It is much easier for legislators to arrange a meeting if they know who you are, what you wish to discuss, and what your relationship is to the area or interests represented by your legislator. And, scheduling an appointment will help gain your legislator's full and undivided attention. Simply call your legislator's office and ask to schedule a meeting. Make certain you identify yourself, note the purpose of the meeting, and whether other individuals will be in attendance. Even if you can't meet directly with your legislator, you can schedule an appointment to meet with their staff.

Confirm the appointment. You should call to confirm your meeting. Sometimes legislators have important, last minute meetings that can't be avoided. Calling to confirm will save you a trip to the office and will give you the opportunity to reschedule.

Know your issue. It is helpful to research relevant information including any recent studies or news articles relating to your issue prior to meeting with your legislator. You should develop a comprehensive understanding about the pros and cons of your issue and know the current status of legislation. In addition, it is important to know your lawmakers past voting record and what their priorities are.

Be prepared. If you are planning a group meeting, it is a good idea to have a meeting with the group before you meet with the legislators. It can be effective for your group to select a spokesperson and maybe one or two others who can act as supporting roles - providing statistics or other anecdotes. Practice your advocacy in front of the group, or have some-

one play "devils advocate" and ask tough questions of the spokespersons.

Select a scribe. It is a good idea for the group to select a scribe, someone who will take notes throughout the meeting. It is especially important to write down any position statements, questions or special requests made by the legislator. The scribe can also be assigned to write the follow-up response and thank-you note.

Outline your concerns. You represent a unified front, and should present your positions as such. Make certain that you spend some time before the meeting outlining your 2 or 3 major talking points and supporting statements. Keep in mind you will have limited time, so your arguments need to be clear and concise. Outlining your concerns will help you - and the group - stay focused.

EXECUTE THE MEETING

Provide accurate information. Make certain you begin the meeting by introducing yourself and anyone else participating in the meeting. Also, say again why you requested the meeting and what you are asking your legislator to do.

Briefly make your pitch. Remember to keep it short and simple. It is important to restate the purpose of the meeting, outline the major concerns and present supporting documentation. Finally, thank your legislator for taking time to meet with you. It is important that your lawmaker understand how the proposed legislation will personally impact you.

Be punctual. It's easy to get lost in government buildings. Make certain that you know where the meeting place is and that you arrive a few minutes early. If you have some extra time, use it to relax and review your talking points.

Be patient and flexible. Due to crowded schedules, it is not uncommon for a legislator to be late, or to have a meeting interrupted. If interruptions do occur, be flexible. When the opportunity presents itself, continue your meeting with a member of the staff.

Be political. Your legislator wants to represent the best interests of their district. Keep your pitch short and to the point. Begin your meeting by informing your legislator what action you want done. Wherever possible demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the legislator's constituency. Ask questions to clarify any position statements made by the legislator and be prepared to answer questions from your lawmaker.

Leave Your Contact Info. Be sure to leave your personal contact information with your lawmaker or their staff. At a minimum, you should include the names, addresses, and

phone numbers of each person attending the meeting. Leaving your contact info allows your legislators to follow-up with you personally.

Do Follow-Up. Finally, be responsive, follow up the meeting with a thank you letter that outlines the different points covered during the meeting, reiterating any commitments he or she has made to you and send along any additional information and materials requested.

Writing Your Legislator

A letter to your lawmaker is next most effective and the most common form of communication. Writing letters help to create a paper trail. Most letters are noted and answered by legislators or their staff. The amount of mail received by a legislator ("mail count") sometimes helps to determine his or her approach to an issue. Here are some tips to get you started.

Be clear and concise. The purpose for writing the letter should be stated in the first paragraph. If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly.

Be specific. Ask for action. Tell your legislator exactly what action you want them to take and give the reasons for your position. Do not hesitate to cite your own experiences or how the proposed legislation will directly impact you. If you are an expert in a particular field (i.e. a doctor, lawyer, patient, etc.) mentioning that can help to build credibility.

Include supplemental information. Enclosed with the letter you can include related editorials, news articles, research studies, letters to the editor, or other supplemental materials that support your position or generally relate to the issue you are concerned with.

One issue at a time. Address only one issue in each letter, and, if possible, keep the letter to one page. Also, thank your legislator in advance for the consideration s/he will give to the issue.

ADDRESSING CORRESPONDENCE

To a U.S. Representative

The Honorable (Full Name)
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. (Last Name):

To a U.S. Senator

The Honorable (Full Name)
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (Last Name):

Phoning Your Legislator

PLAN YOUR MEETING

Contacting your legislator by phone is an effective way to show your support or opposition on a particular issue. Phone calling is most effective when you can mobilize "phone-ins"—when lots of people call their legislator's office(s) regarding a specific issue within a few days or even a few hours of one another.

Be aware of timing. The most effective time to place a call to your lawmaker is close to a vote or legislative hearing. It is not required that you write a letter or have made an attempt to contact your lawmaker prior to a phone call, but it is helpful. If you have written or visited with your legislator in the past, remind them or their staff of this previous contact when you call.

Write a script. Before you make the call, think thoroughly about the reason for your call. Your phone call will be short, so you really

need to have an action for your legislator to make and one or two concise statements prepared to support the action. The goal is to make absolutely clear what action you want your legislator to take.

Identify yourself. Make sure they understand that you are a concerned voter and tell the aide you would like to leave a brief message, for example: "Please tell Supervisor/Councilman (Name) that I support/oppose (name legislation or ordinance)."

Ask to speak to the right person.

Generally, a staff member, not the lawmaker, will take your telephone calls. It is important that you ask to speak with the aide who handles your issue. Make clear your position and the action you think your member should take. Feel free to ask questions and share information about your issue, however be concise and considerate.



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For more information, see www.AmericansForSafeAccess.org or contact the ASA office at 1-888-929-4367 or 510-251-1856.