

Excerpts from NCOA's Advocacy Toolkit

Sometimes the most difficult part of advocacy is just knowing where to start. These tips from the National Council on Aging's Advocacy Toolkit give you the tools to get started. Under the Older Americans Act and The Wisconsin Elders Act, Aging Units are mandated to advocate for older people and their needs. Advocacy includes informing and educating decision makers on important issues. To accomplish the advocacy charge everyone needs to be involved, and a single voice is a powerful tool. Legislators and their staffers are influenced by the desires and will of their constituents.

Ways to be an Advocate in Your Area

- Write letters-to-the-editor about issues. Members of Congress always read the letters in their hometown newspapers. Editors like letters that respond to something that appeared recently in the paper. Keep your letter concise, approximately 150 words. Most newspapers prefer e-mail submissions (you can find specific email addresses on the newspaper's Web site). Include your full name, address, phone number and e-mail.
- Go to town hall meetings that your members of Congress hold and ask questions about senior issues or make an appointment to meet with your member of Congress in the local office. Tell about the potential impact locally of proposed legislation (positive or negative), or tell about the ways that funding shortfalls have hurt the local service deliverers.
- Invite your member of Congress to your facility/organization. If one accepts, you can show off your work, but also ask some direct questions about what they are doing to support your work.
- Share information and ideas with others in your community who care about aging issues, perhaps starting or contributing to a list-serve on senior issues.
- For the most effective message, personalize your correspondence with anecdotes or details of your work with seniors.
- Encourage others, including seniors themselves, to add their voice on the issue(s) as well.

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Communicating with Legislators

- Legislators need and expect their constituents to contact them about issues they are passionate about.
- Building a relationship with your legislator and their staff is an on-going process—you should contact them approximately once every month or two, by email, by telephone, or in-person with local staff.
- Sometimes your messages will ask for something specific (e.g., a vote or co-sponsorship), but other times you should pass along information, ideas and stories that you think will be helpful.
- Remember, you are building a relationship that may last for years, and that puts you in a valued position where a legislator trusts you and may seek out your help or opinion. Keep the lines of communication open and well-used.

How to Write to your legislator

- The best way to communicate in writing with your Members of Congress is by e-mail; sending letters by regular mail is no longer as effective, because they are subject to security checks and then delays.
- Keep your e-mail letter short and to the point.
- Generally you should not mention multiple issues in the same e-mail. Each e-mail message is routed within the office to a single staffer, and that person may not be familiar with two issues that you combine.
- When using [NCOA's site](#), there is no need to put in Dear Representative or Dear Senator, the Web site does it for you.
- When you use [NCOA's site](#) to write to Congress on any of NCOA's key issues, we provide a sample letter that you can use or edit. You may want to add a personalized paragraph to make your message even more compelling.
- Do not use harsh or threatening language. Be thoughtful, straightforward, and clear.
- Do not try to write to Representatives and Senators who do not represent you. It is a waste of effort. They have filters that automatically delete your e-mails.

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Top 10 Tips for a Successful Visit to a Member of Congress or Senate

1. You want to establish—and then strengthen—a relationship with your legislator and his/her staff. You should prepare thoroughly, be polite, be as specific as possible, and never threaten.
2. Don't be concerned if you end up meeting with staff rather than your member of Congress. In many cases, this can prove to be more productive and more effective.
3. Be concise, but cover all the points you wish to make. In general, it is best to address a limited number of issues (three maximum). Most meetings last less than 30 minutes, so budget your time wisely and leave time for discussion.
4. Explain why the issue is important to you and to people in your district/state. Speak from your personal experience and illustrate your points with real people and examples, if possible. Explain the consequences that adverse action or failure to act will have on individuals in your state, city, or town.
5. If possible, cite sources of independent support for your position (opinion polls, studies, etc.).
6. After you make your points, request specific action, and don't be afraid to ask the legislator's position. If they are currently undecided, ask them to inform you by mail or e-mail when they make a decision, and to tell you why they took the position. If you are asking the legislator to provide leadership in moving something forward, ask him/her to provide you with a response or report on what happens.
7. Leave your name, address, e-mail address, affiliation, and telephone number with the legislator or staff. Thank them for taking time to meet with you.
8. Follow up the visit with an e-mail thanking the member or staffer for their time and briefly summarizing the major issues discussed. Be sure to follow through on any commitments you made and provide any additional information requested. Keep in touch with the legislator and staff through occasional correspondence and visits to the local/state office.

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9. Share your experiences and learnings with the NCOA public policy staff. Let them know if there are follow-ups that they should make. Ask them for help if you need it. Send copies of relevant materials to the NCOA public policy staff and staff of your local Area Agency on Aging.

10. Remember--Staying power and relationships are keys to accomplishing anything! Stay in the struggle and strive to maintain good communication with your members of Congress.

Source: NCOA's Advocacy Toolkit

<http://www.ncoa.org/public-policy/congress-successful-visit.html>

Contacting Media — Sample Letter to the Editor

Surveys show that letters to the editor are among the best-read portions of a newspaper. Write letters-to-the-editor about issues. Members of Congress always read the letters in their hometown newspapers. Editors like letters that respond to something that appeared recently in the paper. Keep your letter concise to approximately 150 words. Most newspapers prefer e-mail submissions (you can find specific email addresses on the newspaper's Web site). Include your full name, address, phone number, and e-mail.

The best way to get a letter published in a newspaper is to write in response to a news story or editorial, soon after it is printed. If you see an article on Medicare, Medicaid or another needs-based benefit program, consider sending a letter to the editor. In general, most daily newspapers want short letters to the editor (in the range of 100-150 words).

Following is a sample letter to the editor. To make the most impact, you should consider adapting it to include your own interests, ideas and circumstances.

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Sample Letter:

The article on [name the article and the date of publication] should have mentioned the surprisingly low enrollment rates in benefits programs for seniors in need. There are significant barriers to enrollment that keep seniors with limited means from getting the assistance that could truly help them.

For example, up to 4.2 million people with Medicare are still not receiving Extra Help with their prescription drug costs. The low-income subsidy is worth nearly \$3,200 a year on average for people who qualify, but a significant number have not yet enrolled.

A federal government program that pays Medicare premiums to those who really need the help has a participation rate of only 13 percent and still another similar program will expire in September if Congress fails to act. Incredibly, access to these important programs is also denied if seniors have even a small savings nest egg.

Congress is currently considering long overdue improvements to increase participation in these programs. These changes can go a long way to making needed health care and medicine affordable and accessible to millions of our nation's most vulnerable seniors.

Sincerely,

[Your name]

For More Information View the Complete NCOA Advocacy Toolkit at

<http://www.ncoa.org/public-policy-action/advocacy-toolkit/>

How to Achieve the Highest Impact

Being a successful advocate requires more than the occasional phone call or letter. Treat the legislator as a real person, and work to create a lasting relationship with him or her. Remember to send thank you cards after positive action is taken, or acknowledge their good work in some sort of public forum.

Never underestimate the power of a relationship or a personal story to influence!