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Legislative Pocket Guide for Grassroots Advocacy

Communicating with
Legislators



WEST VIRGINIA
HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION

Communicating with Legislators

While a legislator may be an expert on one or two issues, it is impossible for every lawmaker to master every issue likely to come before the West Virginia Legislature. Elected officials rely on staff, outside expertise and constituent input to effectively represent the people of their district or state.

An ongoing dialogue with your elected officials is the best way to ensure they understand how their decisions will impact their constituents back home. No one can better explain the complexities of health care delivery and the impact policy changes would have on your organization's ability to continue delivering care than people like you on the front line.

It is important to build a relationship with your legislators not just contact them when legislation is pending. There are a variety of ways to communicate with legislators. Membership contact information is available on the Legislature's website at www.legis.state.wv.us. Here, citizens can search to find their Senate and House lawmakers by name or district. You may also contact the WVHA for this information.

The following section identifies the variety of effective ways you can communicate with your legislators:

The Face-to-Face Meeting

Face-to-face meetings as a way of grassroots lobbying are the most effective method of communicating with legislators and their staff, particularly during the legislative session. Below is a suggested checklist for communicating with legislators:

- When requesting a meeting, contact the legislator's Capitol office and ask to speak with the scheduler.
- Explain whom you represent – your hospital – and the reason you want a meeting. Ask the scheduler how you can arrange a meeting.
- Decide in advance who will lead the discussion and what points you want to make.
- At the meeting, introduce yourself and any others in your group.
- Keep your meeting short. Say why you've come and outline the case for your position on a particular piece of legislation or the issues that prompted the meeting.
- Give examples of how the issue affects your hospital and legislator's constituents.
- Stay focused on two or three key messages you want to leave with the legislator.
- Answer any questions asked of you, but if you don't know the answer – don't bluff. Tell the legislator you don't know but you'll promptly get back to him or her with an answer.
- Leave behind any documents on your issues to remind the legislators and staff of the purpose of your visit.
- Offer yourself as a resource to the legislator and the staff in responding to health care questions.
- Be prompt but be patient. Legislators may be late for meetings due to their full schedules or they may get interrupted during the meeting.
- Send a thank you note, thanking your legislator for his or her time and briefly restating your issue. Include any follow-up information that was promised.

Email Tips

Email is often utilized when communicating with legislators. Lawmakers have their own email addresses. Please visit the Legislature's website for information on communicating electronically with your legislator - www.legis.state.wv.us. General Tips: Clearly identify the bill, using the proper number if possible. Be specific. Regardless of what you are writing about, be as specific as you can. Be brief. A brief email is more likely to be read. Use the following format:

The Honorable (member's name)
West Virginia Senate/House of Delegates
Room ____, Building 1
State Capitol Complex
Charleston, WV 25305

Other helpful tips when emailing legislators:

Personalize the Message

Remind the legislator or staff member of your most recent meeting or interaction. Personalization may mean your message is given closer attention.

Get to the Point

Legislators and staffers deal with a large volume of email.

Confine Yourself to One or Two Issues

Explain your position as clearly and concisely. Provide your contact information so the staff can reach you if additional information is needed.

Provide a Story

Share a personal story that relates to the issue.

Phone Call Tips

Contacting legislators directly at their Capitol office (during the legislative session) or home district office (during the interim) is an effective way to communicate. If you have a cell phone number for a legislator, this may alternately be the best way to reach them. When you call, be prepared to leave your name and address, the bill number about which you are calling, a short description of the issue about which you are calling and if you are for or against the bill. In phoning their Capitol offices directly, please note that all legislators have voice mail, so you can leave your message if no one answers. Leave the same information as above.

Other helpful tips when contacting legislators by phone:

Is the Issue Urgent?

Call rather than email if the issue is urgent.

Get to the Point

Explain who you are and why you are calling.

Be Prepared.

Have your facts straight and your talking points ready. You only have a few minutes to get your point across.

Be Ready to Answer Questions

Anticipate questions your legislator or the staff member could ask you and have answers. If you are asked a question to which you do not know the answer, say you don't know but offer to follow up when you have an answer.

Follow Up

Send an email referencing your conversation. Reiterate your points and provide any additional information you'd promised.

WVHA Legislative Staff

Jim Kaufman
President & CEO
jkaufman@wvha.org
304-353-9716

Tony Gregory
Vice President, Legislative Affairs
tgregory@wvha.org
304-353-9719

Brandon Hatfield
Vice President and General Counsel
bhatfield@wvha.org
304-353-9720

Whitney Cherry
Coordinator, Communications and
Legislative Affairs
wcherry@wvha.org
304-353-9717



**WEST VIRGINIA
HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION**

**100 Association Drive
Charleston, WV 25311
(304) 344-9744
www.wvha.org**