

AFFORDABLE HOUSING ADVOCACY

HOW TO:

COMMUNICATE WITH DECISION MAKERS

GOALS

- Persuade the decision makers to support your request
- Become a trusted resource for future information on your issue and related matters
- Be seen as their ally in improving the community and benefiting their constituents

KEY TECHNIQUES

- Make it easy for them to say yes, by making your request specific and relevant to their interests
- Carefully select your arguments and statistics
- Show that you represents hundreds of voters through your organization's membership and its allies
- Be exceedingly accurate, truthful and polite

Effective Written Communications

- **Keep it short and simple.** State your support/opposition upfront, as many officials simply tally advocacy correspondence without reading it. Your text should briefly present your opinion on the single issue at hand.
- **Identify the specific proceeding, policy or legislative bill number** you are writing about before the body of the letter, .
- **Be clear whether the letter represents your individual opinion or a formally approved position from your organization.**
- **Use letterhead stationery** (organizational or personal.)
- **Personalize your letter.** Let the legislator know how the legislation/development will affect you and others in the community.

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- **Give your opinion in a brief, polite, and concise way.** It's acceptable to disagree with the decision-maker, but never attack him or her personally. You don't want to harm your cause by linking it with disrespectful communications.
- **Conclude your letter by urging the decision-maker to take action in support of your position,** and thank him or her for taking the time to consider your views. Be sure to provide your name, and include your mailing address and phone number.
- **If you are a constituent living in the decisionmaker's district, be sure to include this fact in your letter.** If however you are writing to a committee head or other official who serves outside of your area, be sure to explain how your concerns relate to his or her responsibilities.

Effective Telephone Communications

Phone calls are a great way to let your public officials know right away how you feel about an issue, especially on a time-sensitive issue. You will usually speak with a staff person, or voice recording system, not directly to the official whose office you are contacting. Appointed officials, such as Planning Commissioners, may be more easily reached by phone.

- **Write out a list** of the points you wish to make before you call.
- **Call during business hours** (Monday through Friday between 8 am and 5 pm in most jurisdictions, but in some smaller communities hours may be more limited.)
- **Don't be intimidated.** You are not "bothering" your legislator and his or her staff by calling. They receive dozens of calls each day from people like you. In fact, your opponents have probably been burning up the phone lines!
- **Identify the proceeding, policy or legislation** you are calling about if relevant.
- **Be polite and succinct.** Even if the legislator you are contacting is known to disagree with your position, ask that he or she "consider other opinions." Thank the person you are talking to for taking the time to hear your opinion.

Effective Personal Meetings

Meeting with an elected or appointed official is probably the most effective way to convey a message about a specific issue or legislative matter.

- **Plan your visit carefully.** Be clear about what it is you want to achieve and ask of the official.
- **Keep a focused agenda;** don't cram every topic you care about into one meeting.
- **Make an appointment.** Contact the appointment secretary or scheduler. Explain your purpose for meeting when you make your appointment. Ask if the official prefers to receive written information ahead of meetings; if so, send briefing materials.
- **Be punctual and patient.** If the official is late, or your meeting is interrupted, be gracious and flexible. If the opportunity presents itself, continue your meeting with a staff member.
- **Be prepared.** Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials supporting your position. (Even if you sent them in advance, bring more copies with you.) If you have a lot of materials, be sure to provide a one-page executive summary. Don't bring anything confidential; assume anything you provide the decision-maker will become a public document.
- **Plan to leave the materials with the decision-maker** at the end of your meeting. Providing the materials at the beginning will distract from your verbal presentation.
- **Be helpful.** Officials want to represent the best interests of their district. Whenever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the community.
- **Be prepared to explain how you will offer political support,** if you are asking the official to take a position that puts them out on a political limb.
- **Be responsive. Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information** in the event the official expresses interest or asks questions.
- **Don't be afraid to admit you don't know something.** If an official wants information you don't have or asks something you don't know, say that you don't know and then offer to get the information. Be sure to follow through!

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- **Offer a follow-up opportunity**, such as a tour through the community or invitation to an upcoming event that will show officials what you want them to see.
- **Ask for a commitment on your issue** when it is appropriate.
- **Be sure to thank officials for their service to the people.**

Providing Testimony at Public Hearings

- **Review “How to Maximize Success When Public Speaking”** (found in the Tool Box) which also pertains to public hearings.
- **Get to know the environment.** If possible, attend at least one hearing of the body you’ll appear before prior to your calendared date. It will reduce your anxiety if you know how meetings are structured.
- **Bring community members residents, and other advocates with you.**
- **Find out how much time you will have to testify.** Different bodies provide different amounts of time; the allotted time may vary from one agenda item to the next (state law requires only that everyone providing public comment on a particular item be given the same amount of time.) Some bodies allow speakers to grant unused time to someone else, others don’t. Find out also how to get onto the speaker list. Some bodies require advance registration.
- **Keep in mind that the allotted amount of time may be different from what you expect**, even if you’ve checked. If a meeting is running long, a lot of people wish to testify on an item, or an item seems non-controversial, the allotted time for testimony may be reduced. Be prepared to adjust.
- **If you have more material to present than can be presented in the time allotted, consider splitting the presentation up between several people**, with each focusing on a subtopic. (Practice to make sure your story is well communicated.) If you want to make sure your presentation happens in the order you feel will be most effective, make sure to put all of the names on the speakers’ list in order, and explain your intent to the clerk/secretary.

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- **Consider having one or more speakers on your side who speak towards the end of public comment** to respond to any issues raised by opponents.
- **Don't be repetitious.** Nobody wants to sit through a hearing that is longer than it needs to be.
- **Consider asking any supporters who have accompanied you to stand or raise their hands,** but don't have ten people speak to the same points just because you brought them along. Do acknowledge the participants in your collaborative effort; it shows the strength of your coalition and the breadth of support for affordable housing.
- **Practice your presentation!** Never read from a prepared statement, but speak conversationally, making eye contact with decision makers and staff. Make sure you are comfortable with your speaking points and visual aids you have.
- **Be careful with PowerPoint;** you may spend all of your presentation time fixing a slideshow that was working just fine half an hour earlier. Flip-charts and poster board can be just as effective and is less subject to malfunction.
- **Practice before an audience,** if you are uncomfortable with public speaking – or have someone else go up to the mike.
- **Think about the different political perspectives and issues of importance to the various members of the body to which you are speaking.** Different messages may be more or less effective for different decision-makers; plan your presentation accordingly. For example, if one decision-maker is particularly concerned with the local economy, you might want to emphasize the construction jobs your development will generate and the need local businesses have for affordable housing for their employees.
- **Provide any written handouts, maps, and such to the members of the body at least a week ahead of time.** Some of them will read it in preparation for the hearing, but if you hand them the materials as you begin speaking, none of them will have time to do so (and if they do read it then, they won't be listening to you!) Bring extra handouts to the hearing in case an official requests another copy.
- **Don't become flustered by cameras.** Many communities broadcast public meetings on local cable.

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- **Be prepared for a long meeting.** Agendas are subject to shuffling. An item that you expect will be heard at a particular time may be heard hours later – or earlier. Hearings can go late into the night. Make sure your calendar is clear: you’ve lined up childcare and you’ve brought water, snacks, and perhaps knitting or a crossword puzzle.
- **Be polite. Look the officials in the eye. Speak clearly. Thank them for their time. Ask for their support.** Even if you are on a first name basis, in a hearing address officials by their honorific titles and their names (Supervisor Cortez, Commissioner Chang, Councilwoman Washington). When the bell signifies that your time is up, finish your sentence within four or five words, thank the officials, and move away from the podium. If you finish before the bell rings, thank them, ask for their support, and tell them you are available for questions. If none are forthcoming, take your seat.