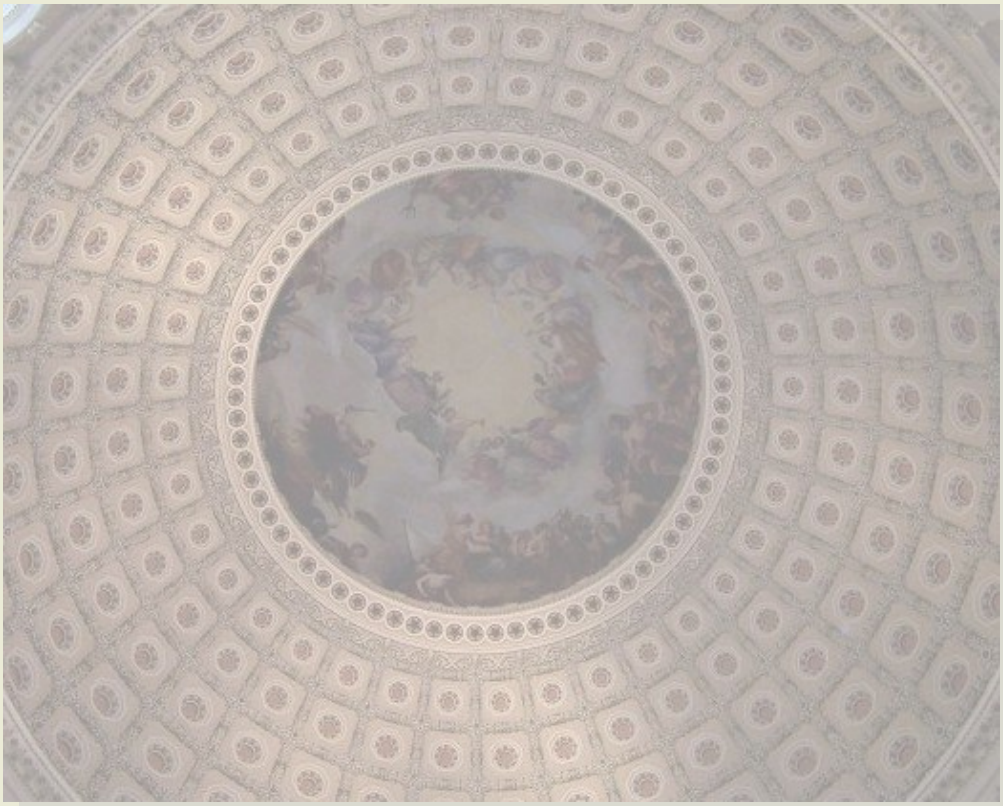
Legislative Handbook

A Guide to Being a Successful Advocate



APSE
ADVANCING EMPLOYMENT.
CONNECTING PEOPLE.

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(Adapted from ND MIG Legislative Advocacy Handbook)

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Being an Advocate

Congratulations – you have decided to become an advocate! Welcome to the community of individuals, organizations and agencies dedicated to working for positive social change. Being an advocate is a lifelong job; a process that takes patience and determination. Advocacy is about recognizing what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter". In recognizing our individual gifts and talents, we have the capability of changing our world. As advocates, we can create change and call for a more inclusive environment for not just persons with disabilities, but everyone.

Of course, advocacy goes beyond just recognizing the need to speak up. It goes beyond just thinking to include action – standing up for something. Writing letters to legislators is a very powerful and effective way of getting across ideas and concerns you may have as an advocate. It is important that we recognize the power of the pen (or keyboard) and personal conversations and develop connections with our representatives. As a government for the people and by the people, we must assert our right to be active advocates!

Legislators have major influence over services and supports for people with disabilities, through funding and policy decisions. The job of legislators is to respond to the needs of their constituents – that means you! It's important that legislators know that someone is paying attention to the issue of community employment for people with disabilities – otherwise they are likely to ignore the issue or only listen to the other side. Therefore it's important that strong voices for community employment be heard. This Legislative Handbook will serve as a tool to help you become a better and more confident advocate. Remember, change can start with YOU!

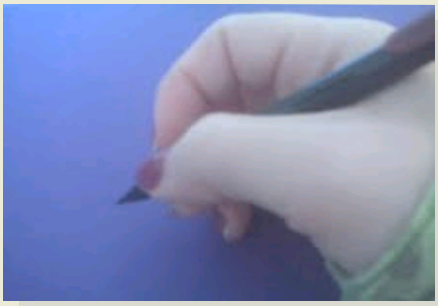
Dealing with Legislators

It is important to recognize that legislators, particularly those in the United States Congress, are extremely busy. There is often an impression that legislators don't care – however that is not typically the case. Legislators do care, but it is our job to help them care. The reality is that many people make demands on legislator's time, looking for help on a wide variety of issues. It can be very challenging for legislators to balance all the demands they have on them. It is also often difficult for elected representatives to understand and be experts on every issue that comes before them, Elected representatives are subject matter experts on only a few issues, and they rely mostly on their staffs and constituents to keep them informed on the wide array of topics they have to deal with. Given the time demands on elected officials, and the wide variety of issues that come before them, it is therefore critical to be simple, clear, direct, and as brief as possible when communicating with legislators. It is also important to recognize that legislative staff are critical allies in efforts to influence legislators. Staff can assist in getting access to a legislator, and legislator's often rely on staff to provide guidance on issues. Finally, and most importantly, it should be recognized that in most cases legislators will only pay attention to an issue if they are hearing about it from their constituents. Therefore, it is absolutely critical that legislators at the federal, state, and local levels hear from us, and in sufficient numbers, so that they pay close attention to issues impacting employment in the community of people with disabilities.

How to Write a Letter

You probably have written many letters before, whether to friends or family or long-distance pen pals; however, writing to a legislative member is a bit different. There are important things to keep in mind while drafting your letter such as length, format, etc. The more well-written your letter is, the more likely your message will be seen as powerful and lasting. Here are some suggestions to think about as you write your letter.

IDENTIFY WHO YOU ARE



Let your representative know who it is that is sending them the letter. It's important that you let him or her know that you are in fact a constituent from their region or district. Of course, organizations and agencies can write to representatives as well, but always remember to include your name, address and telephone number, so he or she can get in contact with you.

ADDRESS LETTER APPROPRIATELY

Always address your letter to "The Honorable" (fill in name). Depending on who you are writing, you will use a different salutation to begin your letter. For the United States Congress, use "Dear Representative [Last Name of Member]" if you're writing to a member of the House of Representatives, and "Dear Senator [Last Name of Member] if you're writing to a member of the Senate. If you're writing to a member of your State Legislature, follow similar rules.

KEEP IT SSS (SWEET, SHORT, SIMPLE)

No one likes to read a letter that is so long it loses focus and gets confusing. Letters should not go over two pages in length—one is even better. Your representative will be more likely to respond to letters that are written precisely and with a clear focus. It's useful sometimes to list out or bullet a couple of points you want to make in your letter – not only does it help your legislator follow the letter, but it helps keep you on track when writing. Short descriptions of just a couple of words in bold type at the beginning of a bullet point or paragraph can also help in making your ideas stand out. The more direct you can be in your letter the better. The first paragraph should you state your purpose for the letter, who you are, and what you would like to see happen. The middle of the letter should list the specific issues or concerns you have with just enough detail to make your point. The closing paragraph should once again state what you would like to see happen. If possible, include the numbers/names of specific legislation that you are referring to.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

It is a nice touch to include a personal story in your letter that relates to whatever issues you are speaking about. While stating facts is helpful, the facts come alive when they are attached to a story about yourself or someone you know, and is likely to make your letter more memorable. It is human nature to gravitate toward personal stories. Providing a personal touch to your letter will make it more memorable. There is great power in the ability to share one's experience with others.

BE COURTEOUS

No one likes to get a letter in the mail full of only complaints with no suggestions for improvement or change. If you have an idea you want to share, say it in a non-accusatory way and invite your legislator to consider an alternate viewpoint or take a different course of action. Part of building a relationship with your legislator is to include in your letter a statement of appreciation for their time and consideration of the matter at hand. A long list of threats or complaints will certainly not help your legislator adopt a particular position. As an added note, a follow up letter of thanks after legislation was passed is always appreciated by legislators and their staff.

DON'T PACK THE ENVELOPE

Sometimes there are certain studies or press releases we know of that relate to the issues talked about in a letter, however, do not include them in your envelope. The more paper you have packed in the envelope, the more likely it is that your letter will be pushed aside or discarded. Instead, offer in your letter that you would be willing to send additional information if they would like it. Remember, it's about keeping it simple.

TELL THE TRUTH

State only the facts. Do not try to guess at certain things you are not sure about. If you stretch the truth in your letter, it loses credibility. In order to be taken seriously, always tell the truth and stick to reliable information.

SEND IT ON TIME

It's important that when you have an idea or suggestion for your legislator about a particular issue, tell them right away. The longer you wait to take action and use your skills as an advocate, the less likely it is that your letter will be effective. Be aware of current legislation and what is going on in the political sphere.

KEEP IT NEAT

When possible, type your letter instead of handwriting it. If you don't have access to a computer and printer, then be sure to write legibly. If you are concerned you cannot write legibly, find someone else to help you write or type the letter. Be sure to use business style formatting (see the internet or library for a reminder on how to use this format). Always print 2 copies of the letter – one for your own records and one to send to your legislator. Also, never print on stationary paper; just use plain white paper – it's much easier to read.

Sending an E-mail

Today we have the ease and convenience of using the internet at our fingertips, this includes access to e-mail. Legislators also have access to e-mail and constituents may chose to send their representative correspondence through the internet. If you chose to send an e-mail, there are some things to keep in mind similar to when writing a letter:

- Be sure to put your name and contact information in the e-mail.
- Share personal stories or experiences the same as you would in a regular letter.
- Think about what your message is, be brief and keep it simple.
- Do not send an e-mail everyday – eventually you will be seen as "spam".
- Send the e-mail only to one legislator – cc'ing many legislators diminishes the power of your e-mail. If you wish to contact multiple legislators on an issue, send them each a separate e-mail.
- Do not send attachments – you can offer to send additional information separately.
- Be kind – do not be argumentative or overly critical in your e-mail.
- Remember to proofread your e-mail – make sure it's free of spelling and grammatical errors and makes organizational sense.

Phone Calls

Sometimes when we don't have a lot of time, it is easiest to make a phone call to our legislator. Again, as with letter writing and e-mails, there are things to keep in mind:

- Be sure to introduce yourself – provide your name and address, so your legislator knows you are a constituent. If it turns out they are not available, feel free to speak with one of his or her staff members. They are capable of answering many of your questions and addressing concerns you may have.

- Think about what you want to say – sometimes having a written list of talking points is helpful in remembering the most important things. (This can also help if you're nervous.)

- If there is a particular piece of legislation you are referring to, name the bill or statute.

- Do not ramble in your conversation – keep it short, simple and to the point. State your reason for calling and what actions you would like to see the legislator take.

- Don't forget to ask your legislator their view on the position.

- If you feel talking about the issue further would be beneficial, make an appointment to meet with him or her in their office.

- Make an offer to provide additional information, if your legislator is unsure about voting for/ against a particular issue.

Remember, phone calls are a great way to make a personal connection, share your views and request a particular action by your legislator. Always be courteous and leave your contact number, so if someone from the office wants to speak with you further they have a way to contact you.

Face-to-Face Meetings

If you plan on meeting with your legislator in person, it is very important that your meeting be effective. In order to have the best discussion possible, you must come prepared and ready to answer questions that your legislator and his or her staff may have. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Know your stuff! The more you know what you're talking about, the more prepared and less nervous you will feel. Look at your legislators past vote on particular issues and know what the opposition is saying about the particular issue at hand.

- Express your views in a respectful manner.

  Be kind!

- Be cognizant of the fact that you have a limited amount of time to meet. Legislators are busy so your meeting should not be much more than 30 minutes.

- ·Be sure to develop a strong relationship with the legislative staff as they are often times the main point of contact for the legislator.

· Leave behind informational fact sheets that summarize the points you are making in your conversation with the legislator for future review.

· Don't forget to give them your contact information to be in touch with you later.

· Follow up with a "thank you" letter expressing your appreciation for the opportunity to meet with the legislator and his or her staff. This shows regard for the fact that you

- Be specific about what you would like the legislator to support – don't just ask for general support.

- Be prepared to answer questions. If you are unsure, don't make up something. Instead, tell your legislator that you will get back to him or her with more information.

- Leave behind informational fact sheets that summarize the points you are making in your conversation with the legislator for future review. Be sure these fact sheets are short, simple and clear.

- Don't forget to give the legislator and staff your contact information to be in touch with you later.

- Follow up with a "thank you" letter expressing your appreciation for the opportunity to meet with the legislator and his or her staff. This shows respect for the fact that you understand how busy their jobs are and how valuable their time truly is.

DON'T: When meeting, be sure not to speak in an argumentative manner. While you may or may not approve of certain aspects of your legislator's political party, do not make the meeting about "party politics". Remember why you are meeting – it's about the issue(s) at hand – not which party is better than the other!

Contacting Your Legislators

House of Representatives:

http://www.house.gov/Welcome.shtml

Type your zip (+4) in the box on the upper left hand side.

To find your zip code (+4): http://zip4.usps.com/zip4/welcome.jsp

Fill in the information in the boxes provided and hit submit.

United States Senate:

http://senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

Select which state you are residing in from the drop down box at the top of the page.

State Legislator:

http://www.usa.gov/Agencies/_State_and_Territories.shtml

Click on your state and follow the links to your state legislature website.

Other Useful Websites:

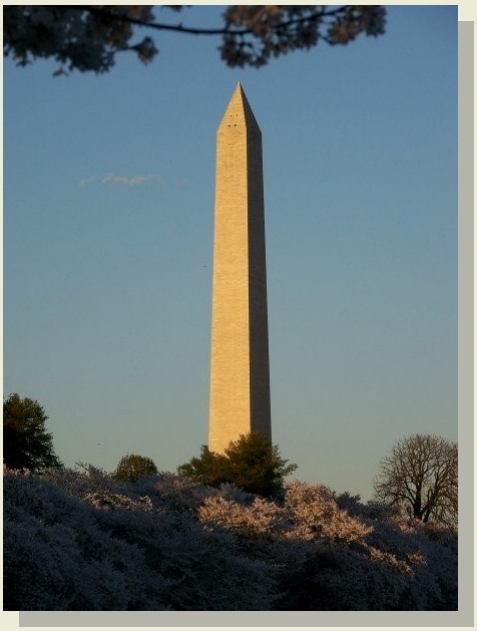
http://www.congress.org/congressorg/dbq/officials/

http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml

Things to Remember...

So now you've done it—you've finished reading this handbook and are ready to start your advocacy efforts, right? Well, almost; there are a few more things to think about. Before you begin tracking legislation and writing letters or making phone calls, here are some important reminders.

Remember that the legislative process is both slow and fast at the very same time. Sometimes action is needed right away to show support for a bill while a vote may not actually happen until many months later. This can be frustrating at times when it seems like nothing is moving forward. It is always good to remember that even if you feel like your letters, phone calls or e-mails are not making a big impact, they are! It is difficult sometimes to see what is going on behind the scenes in the policymaking world. There are often times many conversations that occur between representatives and their staff and other interest groups that you might not always be aware of, but remember that everyone has an importance part to play in the policymaking process.



Also, there are several parts to the legislative process at both the federal and state levels, and each state may have slightly different processes for passing legislation. It can at times be a very complicated process that involves a lot of back-and-forth debate between members. Each state has their own resources for educating the public on their legislative processes, so be sure to check your state's government/legislature website.

In the following pages you will find some useful websites to visit to assist in tracking (following) the legislative process. Also, you will see a sample letter to use as a template when deciding on how to format your own letters and a mock script to use when calling a representative's office.

Additional Publications on Working with Legislators

Robert "Bobby" Silverstein was a long-time Congressional staffer, who was instrumental in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. He has put together a number of excellent guides on interacting with legislators and their staffs including:

A Congressional Insider's Guide to Influencing Disability Policy - Effective Strategies for Interacting with Policy-Makers - http://www.bcm.edu/ilru/html/publications/bookshelf/effective_interacting.html

How to Influence Policy-Makers and the Policy-Making Process - Tips for Disability Policy Change Agents - http://www.bcm.edu/ilru/html/publications/bookshelf/influence_policy-makers.html

Also, visit the following website for some good resources on developing your advocacy skills! Even better, some of the available resources are FREE! http://www.advocacyguru.com/default.htm

For more information about the policymaking process, visit:

http://www.votesmart.org/resource_govt101_02.php

Sample Letter

DATE

The Honorable (Insert Representative's Name Here)
United States Senate/ U.S. House of Representatives (Select One)
Washington, DC 20510

Dear (Insert Representative's Name):

I am writing to express my support for the Achieving a Better Life Experience Act of 2009' or the `ABLE Act of 2009' (H.R. 1205). As one of your constituents (in the state of XXX or in the XXX district of the state of XXX) and an advocate on behalf of the millions of Americans living with a disability, I ask that you support this piece of legislation because it will improve many lives.

As introduced the Act would establish tax-exempt savings accounts, called ABLE accounts, for individuals with disabilities. The money saved would then be able to be used to pay for certain expenses, including education, housing, transportation, employment support, medical care, and certain life necessities.

The ABLE Act is an important step in ensuring that individuals with disabilities are given an opportunity to save for their future. Both parents of children with disabilities and adults with disabilities alike will benefit because of these new accounts. Citizens with disabilities deserve every opportunity to live full and productive lives within their communities. Furthermore, the ABLE Act will reduce the barriers to employment faced by individuals with disabilities as they will now be able to save money in order to help pay for costs associated with employment supports, a critical need of so many individuals with disabilities in order to maintain their employment.

So many individuals with disabilities rely on public support programs such as Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI), and Medicare. Without these programs individuals with disabilities would not be able to live safe, productive and dignified lives. Because these programs are essential to individuals with disabilities, the prospect of losing a much-needed benefit if accrued savings go beyond the Medicaid and SSI countable asset limit of $2,000 provides little incentive for asset development and individuals with disabilities are discouraged from participating in meaningful work because of the fear they will lose their benefits.

The ABLE Act is a positive step forward in ensuring that citizens with disabilities are capable of saving their earnings without facing penalty or the prospect of losing their benefits. Giving citizens with disabilities the chance to establish an 'ABLE Account' is an effective way to better their lives and encourage responsible asset development as the rest of our citizens are able to do. Thank you for your strong leadership!

Sincerely,

Your Signature
Your Name Typed

Sample Script for Calls

Here is a sample script that you can use when you are calling your representative's office. Of course, change it as you need to in order to fit what you are calling about. If you are calling to express thanks, then instead of asking for support, tell the staff member you would like to express your appreciation that _____ took a particular action.

Remember, you probably will not get to speak with the legislator personally. but you might be able to speak with one of his or her staff members. However, often times constituents will be directed to talk with a secretary or intern working in the office. But don't worry—your call is noted and very much appreciated.

CALLER: Hi my name is _____ and I am a constituent of (Representative/Senator) _____'s. I am calling to ask for his/her support of a very important piece of legislation on _____ (name the issue the legislation is about). I ask that (Representative/Senator) _____ support the bill _____ (name of the bill).

STAFF MEMBER: ***He/she may ask you some questions about why the legislator should support the particular bill.***

CALLER: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. If you have any questions I can be reached at (___)-(____-_____). Thank you!

“ Action is the key to all success. ” - Pablo Picasso

“There is nothing wrong with change if it’s in the right direction.” - Winston Churchill

“ It is not length of life but depth of life. ” - Ralph Waldo

“A right delayed is a right denied.”
- Martin Luther King Jr.

“The key to change... is to let go of fear.”
- Susanne Cash

“Diversity is the one true thing we all have in common. Celebrate it every day.”
- Anonymous

“All progress occurs because people dare to be different.”
- Harry Millner

“Failures are the finger posts on the road to achievement.”
- C.S. Lewis