

TIPS ON LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

Be an Advocate for Children's Health Issues

Our state and federal policymakers want and need to hear from you about issues important in promoting and protecting children's health and pediatrics. As a pediatrician, registered voter and member of the Florida Chapter-AAP, your input to legislators is key in helping them understand pediatric and child health issues. They understand this and also know that their political future lies in your hands!

Developing relationships with lawmakers

One of the best ways to make a difference and effect legislative change is to go about it the old-fashioned way: by developing ongoing relationships with your lawmakers. The time to start is well before the legislative session or when you "need" that legislator. Time must be taken to hone these relationships so that in a crunch, you know you can call upon this legislator to work with you on an issue that you are passionate about. See the "Developing Relationships" information sheet (attached).

Writing letters

Letters and e-mails allow you to state your position without someone interrupting the conversation. It also lets the policymaker know that you care about the issue, and that you intend to watch his/her decisions regarding that issue carefully. See the "Writing Letters" guidesheet (attached).

Be specific, brief, and courteous: keep the letter to one page or less, and concentrate on only one issue. State the purpose of the letter in the first paragraph, and identify that you are advocating as a member of the Florida Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. If you are writing concerning a specific bill, identify the number of the bill. Explain the importance of the legislation to you and the children of our state. Always remember to mention that you are a registered voter in their district, and always be courteous, even if you do not agree with the lawmaker's position on the issue.

Request a reply: Always close the e-mail or letter by asking for a response in writing from the policy maker. You are taking time to address them concerning this issue. As they are representing you, they should take time to write you back.

You may also send letters via fax when a decision on a vote is forthcoming. Most legislators have published fax numbers, so faxing has become a popular method of communication. It is a quick and easy way to get a letter to them, for the cost of a phone call. Be sure you include your fax number on your correspondence, as well, in case they decide to return a response via fax. (Faxes do not work as effectively for communicating with members of Congress. Heightened security at the Capitol in Washington D.C. has made delivery of faxes slower.)

Addressing a letter to a Senator:

Honorable (full name)
Dear Senator (last name):

Addressing a letter to a Representative:

Honorable (full name)
Dear Representative (last name):

Calling your lawmakers

There are times when you need to get in touch with a lawmaker immediately, and you don't have time to write a letter or even draft an e-mail. That's a good time to use the most effective and common method of communicating with your legislator--making a phone call.

Be clear and brief: begin the call by making it clear that you are a constituent of theirs: "My name is Jane Doe, and I live in ____." Limit the call to one issue and be specific about why you are calling, what bill you are calling about (stating the bill number, if possible), what action you would like your Legislator to take on this issue, and ask where your Legislator stands on the issue. "My name is Jane Doe, and I live in _____. I'm calling about House bill number 364, a bill that would strengthen Florida's child restraint law. The current law does not protect children in the four to eight year old age group, who are not protected by adult seat belts. This law would provide for the use of booster seats, which have been shown to significantly lower injury and death rates in other states. I would like to see Representative Jones support bill 364. Can you please tell me where he stands on this issue?"

Request a Response: Regardless of your legislator's stand on an issue, never use abusive language or threaten them in any way. If the policymaker does not support the bill you are calling about, kindly let them know that you are disappointed in their

position. If you are speaking to someone in the office and they do not know the lawmaker's position on a specific issue, be sure to ask them for a written response once they have had an opportunity to look at the issue more closely. "I'm disappointed to hear that Representative Jones does not support House bill 364. Strengthening Florida's child restraint law is critical in protecting our children from injury, not to mention saving our state millions of rehabilitation dollars, but I appreciate your time."

Write a Letter to the Editor

It is now possible to send a letter to the editor of many newspapers via e-mail. Studies have shown that people actually read letters to the editor more often than they read editorials written by journalists. Furthermore, leaders in the community, as well as policymakers, read letters to the editor to gauge the public's attitude about current issues. That is why it is important that editorials, letters to the editor, and articles be published in magazines, newsletters, and newspapers on a regular basis.

Be brief, clear, and concise: always check the newspaper's guidelines for submitting letters, which are usually stated on the editorial page. Be sure you have included your name, address, telephone number, fax number, and e-mail address in your letter. Anonymous letters to the editor are not accepted. Begin your letter with, "Dear Editor," The letter should never be longer than one page (most guidelines state less than 250 words), and should never cover more than one subject. Be sure to state the purpose of your letter in the opening paragraph.

Your letter has a better chance of getting printed if you write about issues or legislation that is current. Write the letter in support of or against current legislation at the local, state, or national level.

If your letter is not printed: don't be discouraged. Most newspapers, magazines, etc, receive more letters than they can possibly print. They will often print one letter on a particular subject that is representative of others they have received. Keep trying! Even if your letter is unpublished, it is still read by the editors. This can help sway their decision of what topics to cover more thoroughly in their paper.

Meeting Face to Face

The most effective means, by far, to express your view on an issue to your legislators and positively affect the outcome of policy debates and legislation is to speak with them face to face.

Schedule an appointment: if the legislator is not available on the date you schedule the meeting (last-minute conflicts arise often with legislator's scheduling), meet with the person on his or her staff who handles the issue you came to discuss. These meetings, even with staff members, are very effective.

During the meeting: be sure you discuss how the legislation you are concerned about will affect children in Florida or even your practice. Personal stories make a powerful impact and are proven to achieve results. Always remember to be polite. It is a good idea to follow-up after the visit with a personal thank you letter to the legislator or staff member for their time. Also, offer your assistance or expertise on this matter in the future.

If the legislature is in session and your senator/representatives are in the Chamber, you may request that a message be sent to him/her through their aide or receptionist.

One of the best and most convenient ways of visiting with legislators is in their hometown offices, when schedules and timing may not be quite as hectic as during the session. See the tips in "Visiting with Legislators" (attached).



Developing Relationships with Lawmakers

Developing relationships with your legislators plays a key role in effectively advocating for children. Here are a few simple and enjoyable ways you can get to know your elected officials:

- **Create opportunities for social situations**
Arrange to meet with your legislators in a relaxed atmosphere such as your office or a restaurant. Or you may want to take him or her to play golf or go fishing. Invite a few of your friends, neighbors and colleagues to join you. A specific issue isn't necessary. General conversation is a great way for you and your legislator to get to know each other and establish a positive, lasting relationship. In addition to having an opportunity to express your views, it is a great opportunity to hear the views of your elected official.
- **Speaking engagements**
Invite a legislator to address your hospital staff, county medical society, specialty society, or civic club.
- **Be a resource**
Offer your services as an "advisor" to a legislator on children's health care issues. Give him or her your phone numbers, fax number, mailing address and email address. Encourage him or her to use you as a resource on any children's health matters before the legislature. Also, use the legislator as a resource regarding state issues and politics. Ask questions to determine what they think about other, non-medical issues. This is especially important during election years.
- **Develop relationships with staff**
Just like pediatricians rely on their office managers, legislators rely on their office staff. Take time to get to know the staff of the legislators. This will ensure that you become a "credible" source.
- **Keep an open mind**
Remember that there are two sides to every issue and avoid being confrontational. Don't damage your relationship over ONE issue. Remember that he or she is obviously in a position to help or hurt our cause. There will be other issues to negotiate in the future and if there is resentment or hostility from past meetings, then chances are, we won't be very effective.
- **Thank your legislator**
A simple "thank you" goes a long way. Take the time to write a letter or personally thank your legislator for his or her support.
- **Actively support your legislator**
Get involved with his or her campaign. A legislator never forgets who helped him win an election. Getting involved can take as little or as much time as you desire. You can spend an afternoon stuffing envelopes, putting out campaign signs or you can host a fundraiser or serve on his or her steering committee. The point is to get involved with the candidates whom you support in addition to supporting them financially.



Visiting with Legislators

Meeting with legislators will enable you to become more acquainted with your elected representatives. Schedule an appointment to discuss a specific issue or to follow up on a letter you have sent.

Occasionally, legislators will be able to meet with you if you simply walk into their offices. If the matter is urgent, you can stop by the office and leave a message with an aide if the legislator is unavailable.

When making an appointment by phone or letter, be sure to advise the receptionist about the group you represent and the issues or bills you wish to discuss with the legislator. This information can help the staff to prepare the legislator for your visit. You may also want to send a fact sheet or other pertinent information to a legislator's office before your visit. This letter can also serve to confirm your appointment.

The following guidelines will help make your visits to legislators more effective.

- *Come prepared.* Before meeting with a legislator, prepare for the visit by reading available background material on the issue you wish to discuss. Be prepared to offer solutions to the defined problem. If you plan to discuss a specific legislative proposal, be familiar with the bill. This includes knowing the bill number, sponsor, and status of the bill. Although you do not need to know every detail about a specific piece of legislation, you should be able to discuss the issue it addresses and explain why you support or oppose the proposal. Try to discuss the issue or problem in a manner that is relevant to the lawmaker; draw examples from your experience that demonstrate how the legislation will affect children or pediatricians in his or her district.
- *Coordinate your presentation.* If two or more chapter members or members of your coalition plan to visit a legislator together, coordinate your presentations before the visit. Try to limit your party to no more than three to avoid confusion. With a large group, legislators may resort to making speeches rather than engaging in dialogue about an issue.
- *Present the most important points first.* As a legislator's time may be limited (eg, you may have as little as two minutes of a legislator's time), convey your strongest arguments first. Time permitting, elaborate with more details.
- *Present the facts concisely.* Provide data to support your arguments in favor of, or in opposition to, a bill. However, do not overwhelm a legislator with numbers; a few cogent statistics can substantiate your point.
- *Share your expertise.* Legislators recognize pediatricians as child health experts and welcome the information you can provide on issues related to children's health. Provide anecdotes from your experience in pediatrics, but refrain from using medical jargon.

Visiting with Legislators

Page 2

- *Be familiar with the arguments against your position.* Be prepared to rebut the arguments of your opponents. A legislator may pose questions that reveal that the opponents of a bill have already presented their reasons for wanting to block the legislation. A legislator may look to you to convince him or her as to why the legislation should be supported.
- *Be constructive.* If you want an existing bill to be amended, be clear about what you would like to have added or deleted.
- *Be honest.* If a legislator asks a question you cannot answer, inform him or her that you do not know the answer, but promise to convey the information as soon as possible.
- *Do not be adversarial.* When speaking with a legislator who disagrees with you, it is easy to become frustrated. Remain calm and provide objective reasons for your position. Always be polite and allow the legislator to explain his or her views. Legislators often have access to information from fiscal agencies and state departments to which you are not privy. Even if you do not reach an agreement, thank the legislator for his or her time, and leave the opportunity for future cooperation open.
- *Leave fact sheets.* Whenever possible, leave a one-page fact sheet on the bill or issue you have just discussed with the legislator, as well as your business card for easy reference.
- *Ask the legislator if he or she will support or oppose the bill.* Without applying undue pressure, ask legislators about their position on a bill. In many cases, legislators are reluctant to state their position without first examining viewpoints from all sides. If a legislator is noncommittal, provide additional information that will assist in making a decision on the bill.
- *Follow up on your own.* Send a follow-up letter thanking the legislator and staff for taking the time to meet with you. In the letter, review the issues discussed and any actions agreed upon during the visit.

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics, Government Affairs Handbook



Writing Letters

The following are some helpful guidelines for a successful letter:

Identify yourself - A letter will be given the most serious consideration if it is typewritten on business/personal letterhead. Include your name and address and, if applicable, how the issue in question impacts your practice.

Be Specific - If you want him or her to support or oppose a particular bill, tell them. State your position early in the letter using the specific bill number or legislative issue.

Be Informed - Only use verifiable facts. If you are knowledgeable about an issue and the legislative process, your opinion will carry more weight.

Be Brief - Whenever possible, condense your arguments down to one page or less. A longer letter is less likely to be completely read.

Avoid "Jargon" - Use plain language and avoid complex medical terms.

Personalize the Letter - Don't send form letters or postcards. Your position will be better received if it is in your own words. Use personal stories or examples that will make the issue more real to the legislator.

Don't Demand - Threats don't work. ASK for a legislator's vote. Avoid being argumentative, condescending, or making accusations.

Request a Reply - Let the legislator know that you are interested in his/her position on the issue; ask for a response to your letter. Include your address, phone, and/or fax number in case they need further information.

Follow Through - Send a thank-you letter when a legislator responds or votes the way you requested. Legislators seldom receive such correspondence commending/thanking them for their vote. Such letters WILL be remembered and appreciated.