



DOS & DON'TS IN GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

It's easy to find reasons not to get involved: *I don't have time to make a phone call. No one will listen to me. They don't care what I have to say. I don't have any experience. What if they ask me a question I can't answer?* The rationales are endless. Deep down, many people may simply be afraid of embarrassing themselves. The following list of “dos and don'ts” provides useful tips to help ensure that your government relations experiences are positive and successful.

Dos

Do remember that you are an expert and nurses are the most trusted professionals. Most legislators are not nurses, so you have specialized knowledge that they don't have. Trust that they will listen to you and respect you because you are an expert.

Do try to personalize the issue by giving examples of how you, your students, your institution, and the community are affected. You would be amazed at how much more weight is given to the concerns of a constituent than to those of a lobbyist, but the message must be meaningful. Legislators and their staff know that organizations try to mobilize their members to send emails or letters on certain issues. If the letter reads like a form letter, it will not have the same impact as a letter that includes examples and personal experiences.

Do get a commitment. At the close of a personal visit or meeting, you should attempt to secure a commitment from the official to support your position. For example, you might say in closing, “So we can count on your support on Wednesday?” or *“We hope you recognize this amendment is important to ensure quality health care in our nation, and that you will support it.”* Even verbal commitments are tough to break.

Do realize that talking to the staff is like talking to the elected official. Treat staff the same way you would treat the elected official. Officials rely on staff to advise them on how to vote or craft legislation, and they also develop interpersonal relationships with trusted staffers. If you alienate the staff, you are asking for trouble.

Do be early for meetings. An elected official's schedule can be filled down to the minute. They don't have time to wait for you, even though you may have to wait for them.

Do avoid health care and academic jargon. Although you are an expert, try to frame your comments as small bullet points of information that can be easily understood by a layperson. While your knowledge may be impressive, if you lose your audience your message will also be lost.

Do leave something behind. At the minimum, leave your business card so the staff or elected official can contact you with questions. Optimally, you should provide a useful “leave-behind” that summarizes your position on an issue in digestible tidbits. Statistics are always a plus, as staff will often use information from leave-behinds in speeches or as talking points on the issue.

Do be realistic. Thousands of bills are introduced during each legislative session, but fewer than 10 percent are enacted. Do not be discouraged if your cause does not gain traction immediately. You have established relationships, educated staff and elected officials, and built support for your position. If you have accomplished these things, you have laid the groundwork and increased the chances that a bill will pass the next time.

Do come prepared to defend your position. You always have to know what your opposition is up to. If you anticipate questions and are prepared in advance to defend your position, you are more likely to be persuasive.

Do dress in appropriate business attire. Remember the purpose of your visit is to talk about professional issues. To be most effective, you should appear organized and professional.

Do be loyal to your friends. Like-minded individuals who work on issues similar to yours can be powerful advocates in public policy. They might call you with inside information or invite you to participate in an outreach activity. If you undermine your friends, they will not be around the next time you need help.

Do recognize the value of compromise. You may not get everything you want. However, isn't it better, for instance, to get some money for faculty development than none at all? Think about areas in which you are prepared to compromise and identify those that are not negotiable. In some cases, you may even want to anticipate compromise by asking for more than you actually want. But be careful B do not concede anything until the timing is right.

Do keep your visit or phone call brief and to the point. While staff or the elected official will usually be polite, it is incumbent on you to recognize that they are very busy. Keep your meeting pleasant and brief, and start looking for clues that it's time to wrap things up after 15 minutes. Meetings should rarely last more than 20 minutes, but take your cue from the person with whom you are meeting.

Do make friends before you need them. Whenever possible, develop relationships before you have to ask for something. Try to become familiar with legislators who work on issues of interest to you, even if nothing is developing on that topic or in his/her committee at the time. One obvious place to start is by getting to know the members of the health care, education, and labor committees at your federal, state, or local levels.

Do disagree respectfully. If a legislator has an opposing position on an issue and you are unable to change his or her mind, remain respectful of the time he/she gave you to state your position. If possible, compliment the legislator on his/her work on another issue. The legislator will appreciate your understanding and be impressed by your knowledge of his/her record.

Do say thank you. Whether you are following up after a personal visit or thanking a member for fighting in committee for one small provision that was important to you, it is always nice to

recognize another's efforts. Legislators and their staff work hard, and most have great intentions, so your sincere thanks is appreciated.

Do provide helpful information whenever possible. Providing information is always appreciated. If you send a copy of a current report or an article you think the staff or elected official would find interesting, you present yourself as a considerate, alert person who wants to help. When you provide useful information and are not asking for any specific action in return, in effect, you are reminding the recipient of who you are and are providing them with a nonthreatening communication that will be appreciated.

Do ask the NLN for help. The NLN is committed to helping you. If you need assistance, contact Christine Murphy, the NLN's director of public policy and advocacy, by calling 202-909-2533 or email at cmurphy@nlm.org.

Don'ts

Don't pretend to know something that you don't. If you make up information or skirt around an issue, you'll come off as disingenuous and lose your credibility. Most people can spot a phony.

Don't be afraid to say, I don't know. Legislators aren't expected to be experts on everything, and neither are you. Admitting you don't know the answer to something can be a good thing, because it gives you the opportunity to say, "I don't know, but I can research that and get back to you." Then, when you have an answer, you have another opportunity to make contact with the staff or elected official.

Don't name-drop unless it is directly relevant. It is okay to mention in passing, for example, that you worked with someone from Senator John Doe's office on a related issue last year, or that you testified before a committee on the issue. But it is probably not appropriate to mention that you played tennis with Senator Doe last Thursday.

Don't make threats. Any threats, either veiled or overt, are usually recognized for what they are. Nothing is more offensive and inappropriate than threatening someone to get them to do what you want and it will backfire 100 percent of the time.

Don't become cynical. Keep the faith! Remember that most people who serve in public office do so because they want to make a difference. Try to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Don't disparage other elected officials. This will make your contacts wonder if you're saying the same thing about them to a staff member from a different office. It will always make you look bad.

Don't promise something you can't deliver. You must be as good as your word or you will lose your credibility.