

TAKING ACTION FOR LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH: NUTS AND BOLTS OF INFLUENCING POLICYMAKERS

How to Participate in the Legislative Process

Why Bother?

You have a demanding job. A lot to do in too few hours. You get requests all the time to write letters or send money for causes. You may be deeply cynical about a state legislature or a Congress that seems too preoccupied with highly political matters to pay much attention to public health issues. Why should you take the time to get involved in efforts to influence policymakers?

Because:

- Your community can benefit from the support of a well-placed legislator. Issues usually require a broad base of support in order to become enacted by the Congress or a state legislature.
- You are a constituent and a voter. Elected legislators pay more attention to communications from their constituents than from any other source.
- You are in charge of a local health department. You have special credibility because of your training and experience.
- Public health is not a controversial issue. Everybody is in favor of protecting the public's health. They just don't know exactly what public health is or what it means. If *you* don't explain what your local health department does, *nobody else will*.

What can I do?

There are many well-recognized methods to inform legislators and to establish yourself as an expert consultant on public health. Their purpose is to enable you to make a difference when there is an issue, or a vote, that really matters. It is very helpful to establish a relationship with legislators and their staffs *before* a crisis occurs. That way, when they need information quickly, they will call you because they value your perspective on public health issues.

Here are three activities with which to start building a relationship. Tips for each activity follow.

1. **WRITE** to your legislator(s) to introduce yourself and the issues that concern you.



2. **MEET** with your legislator(s) in your district. Go to his or her local office or, better yet, arrange a meeting at a health department facility where they can see what you do. Members could be invited to participate in a screening or a clinic for flu shots or childhood immunizations, or a public health fair. Perhaps you could go through a mock scenario and walk the legislator through what would happen in the case of an outbreak of meningitis or e-coli. Be creative. Work with the member's office to provide press coverage. Think photo opportunity.
3. **ESTABLISH** a friendly, helpful relationship with the staff that work at handling public health issues for your Senators and Congressional representatives.

Writing to Congress

Your letters to Congress make a difference. Really! Even if you receive only a form letter in reply, your views have been noticed and registered.

Congressional offices pay more attention to communications from constituents than any other source.

Personal letters, rather than form postcards or form letters, are the most effective form of communication. A letter that has been personally composed and that discusses local conditions and concerns is the most likely to receive attention.

Clarity and brevity increase the chances that a letter will be read and consulted. Keep it to one page. State your concern or request in the opening paragraph.

Your letter should be timely and specific. Write concerning something that you know is on the Congressional agenda soon and state what you are asking the legislator to do (support, oppose, make a request to the leadership, etc.) NACCHO will provide you with information about issues and legislation that are currently in play through its Legislative Action Center on the NACCHO website.

Postal mail that is addressed to Members of Congress goes through additional screening that can delay its delivery. Fax is the best method to get your message to a Congressional office. E-mail is increasingly used but if it is not addressed to a particular staff member, it will go into a general mailbox which may slow a response.

Sample Letter

This is a sample of a letter template NACCHO has used in the past. There are more action alerts and letters that you can use as a template at NACCHO's Legislative Action Center

<http://capwiz.com/naccho/home/>.

[Date]

The address format for Senators:

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator _____:

The address format for Members of the House of Representatives:

The Honorable _____
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative _____:

I am writing today to urge you to co-sponsor [bill number and name] S. 625/H.R. 1376, the **Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act**. [Insert information about why this bill is important to you and your community.] As a local public health department official, it is my duty to protect the health of my local community. The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act would give the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the tools and resources it needs to protect public health.

[Add documentation and data about why this is an important issue and how it would impact the public's health.] FDA regulation of tobacco would help protect children and adults, protect public health, provide more information for consumers, and ensure decisions about tobacco and nicotine products are based on sound science. Every year in America, tobacco use kills more than 400,000 people and costs more than \$89 billion in health care bills. It's the leading preventable cause of death in our country. Yet there is virtually no regulation of tobacco products to protect the health and safety of the American people.

Tobacco regulation is more critical than ever because of recent developments. A report released by the Massachusetts Department of Health revealed that the tobacco companies have secretly and significantly increased the levels of nicotine in cigarette smoke between 1998 and 2004 in order to keep adults from quitting and to addict children more quickly.

[Repeat what you would like the Member of Congress to do.] In closing, I encourage you to help safeguard the health of people in our local community and become a co-sponsor of H.R. 1376. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

[Include your name and affiliation, address.]

Meeting With Your Legislator

Arranging a Meeting

1. Send a letter requesting an appointment to the legislator's office including information on what issues you would like to discuss. NACCHO's Legislative Action Center contains contact information for all Members of Congress.
2. Call the local office. Ask for the scheduler who handles appointments in the district.
3. Explain who you are and why you are calling. Refer to the letter you sent. (You may be asked to fax the letter again.) Ask for a meeting the next time the legislator is in the local office (in the case of federal legislators, this will be a weekend or a period when Congress is in recess.)
4. Don't react negatively if it is difficult to get an appointment; these people really are busy. Press respectfully for a day and time. Send a letter confirming the appointment.

Advance Preparation

1. Do some homework; this needn't be time-consuming.
2. Find out the legislator's committee assignments; this information will help you understand the degree of influence the legislator has on your issue. NACCHO's Legislative Action Center will provide you with this information.
3. Be aware of the legislator's political party and general political record; you probably already are. This is important in anticipating any reactions to your issues.
4. Prepare a one-page fact sheet that summarizes what you want and why. NACCHO can provide fact sheets on many issues that are important to local public health. You can edit the fact sheet to include information about local needs and circumstances.

Conducting a Meeting

1. Arrive on time or even a few minutes early.
2. Bring no more than three colleagues with you, if they are also constituents. These could be other local officials, staff from your health department or community members who care about your issues.
3. Agree in advance what points will be made and arrange that each of you will make a specific point. Determine who will lead the meeting from your side so that there is no confusion at the start of the meeting.
4. Deliver your message in no more than three minutes for each person. Provide information on health problems specific to your city or county and state. Explain your role and the consequences both locally and nationally in today's mobile society if local health departments are not able to respond quickly. Stress that local public health departments are on the front lines at all times – whether in dealing with disease outbreak, prevention or in times of manmade or natural disaster.
5. Don't use acronyms and try to avoid jargon. Don't try to be completely comprehensive – hit the high points.
6. Expect to be asked questions. If you do not know an answer, say that you will have to check on that and get back to them.
7. Make a specific "ask" of what you want from the legislator. Even if they seem generally supportive of your issue, that does not tell you what their ultimate position is. Explain

succinctly what you would like them to do (co-sponsor this bill, vote for/against this legislation, sign on to this letter.)

8. If the legislator is non-committal, probe diplomatically for his/her position and try to pinpoint their areas of concern.
9. NEVER disagree, argue or threaten. Make your case in positive terms, be pleasant and keep any disappointment or negative reaction you experience to yourself. You want to leave the door open to future discussions and the best way to do this is to leave a good impression.
10. Pay attention to cues that it is time to wrap up the meeting. Offer your time and assistance if he or she wants to talk about public health or the health problems in your community now or in the future. Find out the name and contact information for the staffperson who handles your issues.
11. Leave behind your business card and a one-page fact sheet that summarizes your issues and what you want. Copy any newspaper articles on your health department and make these available to the legislator/staffperson.
12. Follow-up with a thank you letter within the next day or two.
13. Please advise NACCHO Government Affairs staff of the outcome of your meeting.

Working with Legislative Staff

Federal legislators rely heavily on their staff, both in the district offices and on Capitol Hill. Every member of the House of Representatives and every Senator has a staff aide (or two) assigned expressly to deal with health; most deal with other issues as well, particularly in the House. It is worthwhile to establish a good relationship with these individuals. They are often very knowledgeable and eager to do whatever they can to raise the visibility of their boss in a positive way. It is their job to help their boss respond to voters' concerns. Staffers try to be responsive to constituents and they can be very responsive to credible offers of expert help. Often they are tasked with finding out about an issue in a very short time frame and your goal is to be in their Rolodex (or email address book) as a reliable source of information.

In order to develop a relationship with Congressional staff:

1. Find the name of the person in the Member's Capitol Hill office who is assigned to health. A call to the Washington office will accomplish this; the district office may also know. Contact information for all Members of Congress can be found at NACCHO's Legislative Action Center.
2. Write a letter of introduction to the staffer and indicate that you will be calling soon to discuss your concerns further.
3. Place a call within a week, being sure to indicate your title and place of work so the message slip or voicemail message will show that you are a constituent.
4. When you are able to reach the staffer (some persistence may be required,) introduce yourself again and explain the purpose of your call. Explain the importance of the local health department and the importance of the issue to your community. Indicate that you are hoping for the legislator's support on your issue. Before you hang up, get the email address of the staffer.

5. Follow-up with another letter (or email), including any further information you may have promised, and reminding the staffer of the issue you talked about.
6. If you have the opportunity, call to make an appointment with the staffer in the DC office and meet for a face-to-face meeting.

Why do this?

First, you have educated someone who influences the legislator's decisions. Second, these initial contacts will prove helpful when you have subsequent reasons to contact the legislator concerning specific legislative action. You can direct letters or phone calls to that staffer's attention with an increased chance of receiving notice. Once in a while these activities strike gold: your concerns and expertise match exactly what the staffer needs to devise a bill or amendment or write a speech that his or her boss has directed. Congressional staffers are predominantly young and over-worked and appreciate the help of experts from their district or state. If you are helpful to them, they're more likely to be helpful to you.

Resources on the Web

NACCHO's Legislative Action Center

<http://capwiz.com/naccho/home/>

NACCHO's Legislative Action Center offers action alerts on current topics in local public health, including sample letters that you can customize and send to your legislator. The LAC includes contact information for your legislators as well as their committee assignments. You can also find lists of bills highlighted by NACCHO and whether your legislators have sponsored or co-sponsored the legislation.

Feel free to contact NACCHO's Government Affairs staff: Eli Briggs, Government Affairs Specialist (ebriggs@naccho.org) or Donna Brown, Government Affairs Counsel (dbrown@naccho.org) with any questions.

House of Representatives

www.house.gov

The official website for the House of Representatives. Contains links to webpages of Members of Congress and committees.

U.S. Senate

www.senate.gov

The official website for the U.S. Senate. Contains links to webpages of U.S. Senators and committees.

Thomas

thomas.loc.gov

The official website from the Library of Congress that contains text and details on all pieces of legislation introduced in the U.S. Congress since 1989.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov

The official website for the CDC.

Kaiser Family Foundation

www.kff.org

An extensive clearinghouse of health policy information. The Foundation publishes a *Daily Health Policy Report*.

Thank you for taking action to support local public health! Please contact NACCHO's Government Affairs staff with any questions.