

Contacting Your State Legislators

If you care deeply about a policy or injustice, some of the most effective changes can be local. That includes state government, so contact your legislators to let them know where you stand. You can use the following three questions to guide you.

Why?

What is your motivation to contact your state representatives and state senator? Contact the legislators if you know of gaps in the law, or an unfair law or rule, or people who suffer from a state (or local) policy. If you have personal experience, that can make a big impact. Some of the strongest messages come from personal stories. You may even be invited to testify for a committee.

It's important to keep your message on a single issue or law. Don't deliver a laundry list; communicate one issue at a time.

How?

Find your legislators' contact information. Keep it handy and use it often. Always identify yourself as a constituent and give your name and address. Legislators remember when someone contacts them frequently.

Sign up for your legislators' email newsletters, check their websites, and read their bios. That will give you an idea of where they stand on policies and their priorities.

Know the bill number if you are contacting legislators about a particular piece of legislation. If you have an issue that's not a bill (especially when the Legislature is not in session), know the current law or rule.

A personal contact is the most effective. Meet your legislator in person at her or his office, a town hall, an event, or even for coffee when they're in town. Their legislative assistants can help schedule a meeting, and most legislators have district offices when the Legislature is not in session. Be prepared, because the visit might be brief. If they refuse to meet with you, let people know on social media or letters to the editor.

If you can't meet with your legislators, or if timing is crucial, call their offices or send a letter. Typically, a legislative assistant or intern will answer the phone or read the letter first. You can send an email, but it's not as effective.

Coordinate the message, but make it personal. Form letters or emails are spotted quickly and are viewed less favorably. So, if you have a like-minded group contacting legislators, encourage everyone to write it their own way.

Keep it civil. Even if you disagree with the legislator, be polite but clear on your stance.

Ask for a response. How will the legislator vote? What do they think about a policy or bill? If you speak to a legislator on the phone or in person, write down what they say.

Follow up if there was a vote to express your disappointment or appreciation.

When?

Timing can be everything when expressing your opinion on a bill in the Legislature. You can track the progress of a bill on the Legislature's website. You can also see the deadlines for the bills to pass out of committee or receive a vote.

Contact your legislator before he or she votes on a bill, either in committee (if the legislator is on the committee) or in the House or Senate.

If the bill passes out of the House or Senate, be sure to read amendments that passed because they can change a bill quite a bit.

Sometimes a policy is actually a budget item. Contact your legislators early to let them know the budget item is a priority.

If a bill does pass the Legislature, you might want to contact the governor to either sign or veto a bill.

If you would like to see a new law or rule, contact your legislators early. Be prepared for the long haul, though. Some bills take many years to pass.

