

Tips for Working with State Legislators

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The start of a new legislative session is a critical time for you and your partners to reconnect with returning legislators or build relationships with newly elected officials. Community Catalyst compiled a list of suggestions and tips on how to effectively build and maintain strong relationships with state legislators and grow support for your priorities. Many of these recommendations can also apply to federal or local elected officials, such as mayors, school board and city council members and other decision makers.

Important Note: While 501(c)(3) organizations can legally engage in lobbying, it is important it be done in accordance with the rules of your tax exempt status and funding sources. Please consult with an expert if you have questions about lobbying rules.

Be Intentional When Building and Sustaining Relationships with Legislators

1. Identify Existing and Needed Relationships

- » **Identify the key decision makers on your issue.** This list might include your governor, state representatives and senators (including leadership from the minority and majority parties and any relevant committees and sponsors of relevant bills), city or town executives and more. Identifying who can help (or harm) your issue will inform with whom you will want to build strong relationships.
- » **Identify existing relationships.** Consider mapping out what relationships your staff or coalition partners already have with returning legislators or key decision makers, and plan for who will continue cultivating those connections. This will also help you identify with whom you will want to build new relationships.

2. Build New Relationships

- » **If you are building a new relationship, start by identifying the best point of contact.** For higher-level leadership, this will probably be a staff member, such as their policy advisors or legislative assistants. For lower level officials or closer contacts, this might be the legislator.
- » **Connect with newly elected legislators as soon as possible.** Newly elected legislators are frequently looking to craft their legislative agenda, offering an excellent opportunity for you to introduce yourself and your organization's priorities. Invite newly elected officials to your events, offer a tour of your office or facility, or visit them in their district or their office as they are getting settled.
- » **Remember that committee memberships, chamber leadership and staff can change with each new legislative session.** It is worth identifying where those changes have occurred and to

proactively reach out.

3. Cultivate Existing Relationships

- » **Not all communication is created equal.** Some legislators respond best to emails. Others are swayed by in-person visits. Some pay more attention to calls. Know what resonates best with each office. No matter how you choose to communicate, personalized messages are always more effective than form letters or emails. Be sure to ask them how they prefer to be reached.
- » **Always treat the staff and interns well.** They are your conduit to the policymaker and can persuade a legislator to support or oppose an issue.
- » **Be timely and succinct with your communications, policy asks and meeting requests.** Policymakers have very busy schedules and your priority is only one of many that they will juggle that day. It is essential that you get info to legislators at the right time. If you have talking points or questions for a hearing, send them ahead of time.

4. Be a Resource

- » **Communication is a two-way street.** Make sure policymakers have a reliable and responsive contact in your organization, and be willing to provide talking points, data, reports, messaging guidance and other resources when a legislator needs it.
- » **Legislators require information as well.** Legislators cannot be experts in every policy or issue area. In many cases, they may have limited staff and resources. Make yourself a resource to policymakers requiring more information to make informed decisions that affect your issue.
- » **Be proactive.** Think about reaching out to legislators proactively to provide information or context on your issue in addition to responding to any asks they may have of you or your organization. Consider how you can be a resource and build a strong relationship with a legislator before you make an official “ask” of them.

Have a Persuasive Message

1. Make Your Case

- » **All politics is local.** Provide stories and data about how your issue might affect a legislator’s constituents. Even if a legislator is not currently working on your initiative, try to connect it with other local issues their constituents care about. Some examples could include tying health care issues to fracking, local families struggling with the opioid epidemic, or the connection between health and housing security.
- » **Constituent stories make a difference.** Connect constituents with their legislators to share their stories when possible. A single heartfelt story from a constituent can be much more powerful than a statistic. Policy is not always what drives most conversations -- constituents and their stories matter and give an incentive for legislators to take leadership on an issue.

- » **Volume of communication matters.** A constituent story is important in making your case, but hearing from many constituents about the same issue is even better. High volume of constituent communication on an issue can also help counterbalance the voices of opposition.
- » **Know what the opposition will say about your priorities.** Most likely, legislators will ask if and why there is opposition to your issue. Be prepared to respond, provide counterpoints, and pivot – without spending too much time reiterating their arguments.
- » **When you meet with a legislator, bring a clear “ask.”** Scheduling an in-person meeting with a legislator or their staff can be difficult, so take advantage of the opportunity by coming with an “ask” for the legislator to take action. Your ask could be as big as requesting that they talk to their legislative leadership about a bill or as small as asking them to bring more attention to an issue on social media. Be thoughtful on what ask is most appropriate for the legislator with whom you are connecting and the status of your relationship.

2. Know the Legislative Landscape

- » **Give them an opportunity to be a leader.** Bill co-sponsors are great, but bill champions are better. Elected officials, especially newly elected legislators, are often looking for ways to leave their mark, so think about who is well-positioned to take leadership on an issue you are advocating for and who can move it forward.
- » **Find strength in numbers.** Legislators do not always feel comfortable acting alone. Be prepared to share which legislators are already supporting your initiative. Offering legislators information on where their colleagues stand can help encourage their support. Additionally, you can ask a legislator who is already supportive of your issue to help persuade their undecided colleagues.
- » **Know where the party leadership stands on your issue.** Legislators value their relationships with chamber leadership, so be aware of how your issue might support or complicate that dynamic.

Identify Opportunities to Engage

1. Leverage the legislative process for action. Here are a few important parts of the legislative process where you can leverage your relationships and advocate for your priorities:

- » **Bill sponsorship.** If you or your coalition partners are working to introduce legislation, in most cases you will need a legislator to sponsor, file and advocate for the bill as it moves through the legislative process. In choosing a bill sponsor, consider who is a champion of your issue or who holds the power to move your initiative forward.
- » **Pre-filing.** Many states allow legislators to pre-file legislation before the start of the legislative session. This can be a prime opportunity to garner some early attention to your cause.
- » **The day of the bill’s introduction.** If this is a bill you are supporting, you could organize an event with the key sponsors and invite the press.
- » **Committee hearings.** These represent an opportunity for you to show up in force. Make sure you

know the policies on what you can and cannot bring inside during these events. Every legislative body has different rules. Make sure to tell the press that you will be there!

- » **Bill markup sessions.** These important committee meetings are typically where several amendments to the original bill are debated and voted on before reporting the bill out of committee to the full House or Senate. You can provide talking points about amendments that are likely to be proposed. If you are expecting significant favorable or unfavorable changes to a bill, you can organize a group to attend to show your support or opposition.
- » **Committee and floor votes.** Make sure to thank the legislators who vote your way and consider organizing accountability actions for those who oppose your issue.

2. Identify moments to raise visibility for your issue. Throughout the legislative session, there are several ways to build support and lay the groundwork for your agenda through higher visibility events and meetings. Here are some ideas:

- » **Informational briefings.** Inviting legislators or their staff to attend a briefing or information session at the State House is a great way to raise awareness around your priorities and connect with decision makers in person. If an in-person gathering is not an option, you could organize an informational webinar or phone call for legislators and staff as well.
- » **Welcome packets or drop offs.** Think about opportunities to organize your staff or supporters to visit the State House and connect with legislators and aides. Consider having your members drop off welcome packets to their own legislators with information about your organization and legislative priorities. You or your members could also deliver handwritten notes, postcards or other creative messages to get the attention of legislators and staff.
- » **Receptions or legislative breakfasts.** Hosting a gathering of your supporters with legislators and aides, whether in the State House or in your community, is another great way to raise visibility around your issues. Consider inviting champion legislators to speak during your program, and if your event is in the State House, you could organize constituent visits and material drop offs as well. These events are also another great moment to consider inviting press.