

Contacting Your Legislator

State level—when you contact your legislators' office it is more likely than not that you will leave a message with a receptionist. Your legislator would then call back to discuss your concerns.

Federal level—contact your Congressperson by phone at their district office or Washington DC office. When making a call to federal offices, you may ask to speak with the legislative aide who works on the particular issue.

Prepare a brief statement before you call.

Be sure to include:

- your name
- the district in which you live/work
- any affiliations (i.e. social worker, MSSA member, etc.)
- the issue or bill you wish to address
- how the issue affects you or your clients
- your position on the issue, and the reasons for your position
- what you would like the legislator to do (support the bill or not)
- ask what your legislator's position is on the issue
- ask if you can leave your name and address (Note: if volume of calls is heavy, they may not take it, but your call will be tallied)
- be sure to thank them for their time

In talking with aides or your legislator:

- if they disagree with you, always remain polite and in control, thank them for listening
- if they ask a question you cannot answer, be honest. If possible, tell them you'll find out and get back to them

Follow up:

- consider sending a short follow-up note thanking them for their time and restating your position

WRITING LETTERS TO LEGISLATORS

Legislators read their mail, especially when the letters are personalized—they will pay less attention to form letters due to the high volume they receive. Therefore, a personalized, hand-written note or individualized letter stands out and makes an impact!

Address your letter to:

Representative _____ MN House of Representatives 100 Constitution Ave. St. Paul, MN 55155-1298	Senator _____ Minnesota Senate 75 Constitution Ave. St. Paul, MN 55155-1606
The Honorable _____ U.S. Senate Washington, DC 20510	The Honorable _____ U.S. House of Representatives Washington, DC 20515

Contents of the letter:

- identify the issue or the bill name/number at the top of the letter
- address him/her as "Senator" or "Representative"
- identify yourself and affiliation (i.e. social worker, MSSA member)
- get right to the point - state your position and/or your request.

For example, "I hope you will support/oppose HF_____ (House File #; or SF for Senate File)". Give reasons for supporting or opposing the measure. Tell why you think the bill will help or hurt you, your children, your clients, your community.

- offer your assistance (e.g. to testify at a hearing on the issue)
- you can ask for more information on the issue
- ask for a reply if you want one
- thank them for considering your position

Always:

- be brief, no more than one page
- make it legible
- cover only one issue per letter
- remember that you are the expert - be informative. The volume is so incredible that legislators cannot possibly know the details of each bill that they must make decisions on.
- use terms they will understand; avoid abbreviations and acronyms
- be clear, polite and reasonable - do not lose your temper

Meet with your Legislators

Make an appointment by calling the legislator's office and talking to the legislative assistant. Tell them your topic or concern. If it is later in the session and you can't get an appointment, you can go to the House or Senate Chamber and contact your representative via note. They will usually come out of the chamber to talk with you.

Prepare your Remarks:

- Introduce yourself. Tell them you are a constituent from their district (or that you work in their district), a social worker, a member of MSSA, etc.
- State the issue or bill you are addressing.
- Use examples from your experience, client stories, anecdotes.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Note their questions and provide them with an answer ASAP.
- Before leaving, make a request for action (i.e. to support / oppose the bill)

Always:

- Be on time. But anticipate delays, and having your appointment time shortened! Be patient.
- Come prepared. Have background information on the issue and be specific.
- If you can, know the legislator's perspective and voting record on the issue.
- Realize that you probably know much more about a particular topic than a legislator does. Legislators are generalists rather than specialists. Explain the issue as if you are talking to someone without any knowledge of the area. Don't feel intimidated - you are the expert!
- Be brief. Have two talks ready, one that is 15 minutes or less and one that is 90 seconds - in case the legislator has to leave for a vote.
- Be direct, never hostile, never apologetic. You are trying to build a relationship.

Follow up:

- Leave fact sheets and a short written summary of your position.
- Follow up with a written thank you and a summary of your position.
- Maintain contact with your legislator throughout the rest of the year.

<p>For the number and status of a bill, call: House Index at 651-296-6646 For your legislator's name and number, call: House Information Office at 651-296-3550 or 800-657-3550, or visit the Minnesota State Legislature on the web at http://www.leg.state.mn.us/</p>
