

WRITING YOUR LEGISLATOR 101

Writing your legislator can be a very effective way to influence your elected officials in Lansing, if done correctly. Contrary to popular belief, state legislators do pay attention to what constituents say about legislative issues. But, in order to be heard your opinion must be clear, factually supported, and to some extent neutral in tone. The following advice was compiled to assist MAFP members in contacting their legislators about important health policy issues.

To begin, you need to know who your state representative and senator are. The state legislature web sites will help you find your state representative and your state senator. In most cases the best person to write to about health policy issues are those on the Health Policy Committee.

Next, where possible, use your official letterhead. Often times you are writing as a medical professional and using your official letterhead and official title will indicate your competency to speak on the subject.

“Sincerely yours” is in good taste as a complimentary close. Remember to sign your given name and surname. If you use a title in your signature, be sure to enclose it in parentheses.

DOs

- Your legislators like to hear opinions from home and want to be kept informed of conditions in the district. Base your letter on your own experiences and observations.
- If writing about a specific bill, describe it by number or its popular name. Your legislators have thousands of bills before them in the course of a year, and cannot always take time to figure out which one you are referring to.
- They appreciate intelligent, well-thought-out letters that present a definite position.
- Even more important and valuable to them is a concrete statement of the reasons for your position—particularly if you are writing about a field in which you have specialized knowledge. Representatives have to vote on many matters with which they have had little or no first-hand experience. Some of the most valuable information they receive comes from facts presented in letters from people who have knowledge in the field.
- Short letters are almost always best. Legislators receive many letters each day, and a long one may not get as prompt a reading as a brief statement.
- Letters should be timed to arrive while the issue is alive. Members of the committee considering the bill will appreciate having your views while the bill is ripe for study and action.
- Remember to follow through on any responses with a thank-you letter.

DON'Ts

- Letters that demand votes for or against a certain bill without giving any reasoning are not very influential.
- Threats of defeat at the next election are not effective.
- Boasts of how influential the writer is are not helpful.
- Do not ask for a vote commitment on a particular bill before the committee in charge of the subject has had a chance to hear the evidence and make its report.
- ‘Form letters’ or letters that include excerpts from other letters on the same subject are not as influential as a simple letter drawing on your own experience.

If writing letters is an effective way to communicate with legislators then speaking with them in person is even better. Testifying before a committee or meeting with your legislator personally are two great ways to further influence those at the Capitol. To learn more please contact Joe Neller, Director of Government Affairs at nellerj@mafpc.com or 517.347-0098.