

## COMMUNICATING WITH CONGRESS

### Emails, Letters, Faxes, and Phone Calls

In-person lobby visits are the most effective way for you as a constituent to convey your concerns to your legislators. In addition to these face- to-face meetings, you can build your relationship and share your concerns with your elected officials are through emails, letters, faxes, and phone calls. Congressional offices receive thousands of communications a month. How can you increase the chance that your message will get noticed?

1. **Write about yourself.** Congressional staff say that all communication is important, but messages with some personal content are more effective. Start the letter with information about yourself: where you live, what groups you are involved with, what work you do, and why the issue you're writing about matters to you. One personalized message can carry more weight than 10 form postcards or letters.
2. **Be polite.** Ask, don't tell, your legislator to do something. Staff tend to dismiss angry constituents. Be polite and thank your legislator for a previous vote or co-sponsorship to increase your persuasiveness.
3. **Make a specific request.** Be concise. Mention a bill number or name, if possible. "I would like Rep. John Doe to cosponsor H.R. 1234, the Alternative Energy Act" is more effective than saying "I would like Rep. John Doe to support the environment." Try to keep your message to one or two paragraphs; staff are too busy to read messages that are several pages long.
4. **Include your postal address.** Contact only your own representative and senators. It is tempting to write other legislators who are key decision makers. However, most offices discard messages from non-constituents. Include your postal address, especially in emails, to show that you are a constituent.
5. **Emails and faxes are more effective than written letters and phone calls.** As a result of the anthrax attacks in 2001, all postal letters to Congress are first sent to be processed, delaying delivery by as much as three to five weeks. Phone calls are the least effective method of communication, except when a vote on your issue is scheduled within a day or two.
6. **6. Make your message timely.** If you know a vote is approaching, try to email your representative and senators at least one to two weeks in advance. On some issues, such as the war in Afghanistan or the environment, there might not be impending votes, but legislators still need to hear from their constituents to gauge where the electorate stands.

# FAITH ACTION NETWORK

*A Partnership for the Common Good*

7. **Encourage others in your congressional district or state to contact legislators about the same issue.** Your message is important, but organizing a letter-writing campaign with your family and friends on a specific topic multiplies the impact of your efforts. Including a community leader such as a clergy member, elected official, or businessperson as a voice in the campaign will increase the chances of a message generating attention. Writing a letter on a company or organization's letterhead will get increased attention.
8. **"Adopt" an issue.** Maximize your influence by writing your legislators about only one or two issues, no more than once every few weeks. Focusing your communications on one or two issues can make you an "expert" in the eyes of the office. Thank your legislators if they do what you ask.
9. **Capitalize on the local angle.** Include information about how specific legislation may affect your district or state. For example, if you are writing your member of Congress about rising energy prices, clip and send an article about oil companies' profits along with a quote from a resident who is unable to afford rising gas and energy costs.

Emails, letters, faxes, and phone calls are important ways to express your views and begin to build with your members of Congress. Another approach is to write letters to the editor of your local newspaper. If you include your legislator's name, your letter will likely get noticed by her or his staff.