



Communicating with Elected Officials

Writing to elected officials to communicate your views about legislative or budgeting matters that impact your organization is your right as well as your responsibility. Your advocacy efforts on behalf of your organization and others like it represent a profound way of affecting public policy. A growing number of community activists and concerned citizens send millions of letters and emails to their representatives in Congress. Business leaders and advocacy groups direct their concerns to elected officials in open letters which appear as letters to the editors, as paid advertisements, and on various websites. Professional groups like the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and the American Library Association (ALA) hold annual Advocacy Days in Washington, D.C.

AAM joined The Charitable Giving Coalition, a group of more than 200 nonprofit organizations, to object to proposed legislation to eliminate or substantially reduce charitable tax deductions. Dozens of members of the Coalition met with public officials in Washington, D. C., on November 20, 2013, to speak about the negative impacts of the legislation and propose alternatives. To supplement their efforts, the Coalition prepared and disseminated [online fact sheets, talking points, and templates for press releases](#) for use by those who could not attend the all-day event.

You may not have the resources to mount a large-scale campaign on public media, but you can communicate effectively with your representatives. Constituents have several ways of making contact with elected officials. A good strategy to reach federal, state, and local representatives includes in-person visits and communications by phone, letter, personalized email, or via their official websites. The key is to be consistent, patient, and persistent. Your voice will be heard.

According to [survey results](#) published in 2011 by the Congressional Management Foundation, Congressional staffers noted that personal communications received by elected officials from constituents are more effective than those received from lobbyists and news editors. Views expressed clearly by constituents have the most effect on representatives who may be undecided about or unfamiliar with an issue. The most persuasive communications appear to be: 1) face-to-face single-issue visits by constituents; 2) communications by constituents who represent other constituents; and 3) personalized letters and emails. The survey also found that some of the most effective strategies included actions that took place in the elected official's home base. For instance, representatives paid attention to questions posed at town hall meetings and to issues presented in letters to the editors in their Congressional district's local newspapers.

Preliminaries

An initial step to take is to determine what medium you will use to contact which elected official. The internet, websites, and social media have made grassroots communications easier and faster. You can use the mass mailing forms developed by other organizations, but also consider sending personal emails, which may be more effective. Take advantage of facts, figures, and talking points that are included in texts prepared by professional organizations you trust. Make sure you understand the points and double-check the facts prepared by others. Direct your communications to the persons who represent your state and district, as many members of Congress will not accept correspondence from individuals outside their voting area.

Also remember that since 9/11, security measures in most federal government buildings, including Congress, have tightened considerably, delaying postal delivery by weeks as items are scrutinized or searched. Plan accordingly. Consider addressing your representatives at their local offices closest to you, through their official website, by phone, or by email.

Timing

Depending on the legislative calendar and recesses, you may find it advantageous to arrange a visit to your representative's local office. Members of the U.S. Congress normally spend one week per month and all of August at their home base, campaigning, fundraising, or otherwise looking after the interests of their constituents. These interludes away from Washington, D.C. during Congressional sessions are called "state work" or "district work" periods and serve as appropriate times to make your case in person or to invite the representative to visit your organization.

Political consultants recommend that constituents time their contacts with representatives to coincide with major events such as an election, passage of a significant bill, or budget deliberations. The type, form, and length of the communication should be calibrated to the event. Pay attention to alerts about the beginnings of budget deliberations and to calls for reductions to budgets related to cultural institutions; state your reasons and objections in a well-prepared letter. When a representative votes and acts in ways that you find beneficial to your institution, send a handwritten note of thanks immediately and explain why.

Approach

Whether you communicate in person or in writing, keep any type of communication with your representative formal, brief, and to the point. If you are writing, focus your letter on your interest in a particular outcome or vote. A letter may be positive, in support of a bill or policy, or it may be negative, in opposition to the same. If you arrange for a face-to-face meeting, be prepared to discuss the precise name, number, and sponsors of the bill or legislative act in which you are interested. Whether you are writing or meeting in person, explain how the bill, if enacted, would affect your organization and state or district. State clearly whether you favor or oppose the proposed action. If there is no pending legislation, be prepared to discuss how legislative trends or budget cuts are affecting your organization and community of supporters.

When preparing emails to be sent via the representative's website, determine what topic heading to give your communication by discussing it with a congressional staff member familiar with the categories. The categories are limited to those on the given drop-down menu. There is no category for libraries, archives, or museums. You may have to choose between "Arts and Humanities," "Budget," "Economy," "Education," "Other," or "Taxes," if they are available. If you would like to schedule a meeting or a visit, the representative's website often will have a phone number or email link for the district staff, who can make arrangements.

Sign all your communications with your full name and address. The address immediately signals to the official that you are a constituent.

Always be respectful and willing to speak with members of the representative's staff if the representative cannot meet with you. It is beneficial to get to know the staffers at local and Congressional offices. Some staffers are more informed about specific issues than the representative, who must keep up with the bigger picture.

These guidelines are also useful for writing to powerful members of a community such as business owners, executives of philanthropic foundations, or directors of corporate boards. These individuals also make decisions that affect your organization and constituents.

Tracking Legislative Action

Do your research. Find out how your legislators have voted in the past on the issue that concerns you or what your public official's current position is on the specific topic or related ones. Both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate produce working calendars for each session of Congress. When formalized, the session calendars appear on each chamber's website; the Government Printing Office then publishes print copies and disseminates copies on its [website](#).

In October 2013, the Library of Congress launched a new website, [Congress.gov](#), to track the status of pending legislation. The new website also links to the personal websites of individual legislators alphabetically by name and by state.

National professional organizations such as AAM, ALA, and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) dedicate staff and organizational resources to advocate for museums, libraries, and archives. AAM tracks pending and proposed legislation and organizes an annual Advocacy Day in D.C. AAM also provides a "[Legislator Look Up](#)," which provides quick access to a complete and up-to-date directory of legislators and the top executive members for each state.

ALA maintains an office in Washington, D.C. and provides up-to-the-minute information about [issues](#) and [pending legislation](#) related to libraries. SAA periodically establishes advocacy agendas, which help members hone their arguments and focus their battles. Members of the SAA Issues & Advocacy Roundtable post advocacy news and action items relevant to all cultural organizations on their [website](#).

Regional professional associations often undertake advocacy initiatives within their own states and regions. In Pennsylvania, consider getting involved with the [Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference \(MARAC\)](#), the [Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums \(MAAM\)](#), the [Pennsylvania Library Association](#)

(PaLA), and the [Tri-state Coalition of Historic Places](#). PaLA tracks legislative activity in Capitol Hill as well as in Harrisburg and provides helpful [tutorials](#) about formatting and addressing letters and emails to elected officials.

Context

Be aware of current attitudes toward cultural institutions in general. Governments at all levels have substantially reduced funding for museums, libraries, and archives in the last few years. As economic growth has slowed since 2008, the allocation of public funds for cultural institutions has come under political fire. For decades, voters broadly supported these institutions and accepted them as public goods. Today, current opinion and political support varies radically.

Learn about the economic and educational impact of cultural institutions at the national scale. AAM notes on their [Museum Facts](#) website that museums in the United States employ 400,000 Americans. According to a 2008 estimate, museums contribute about \$21 billion to the U.S. economy each year. This level of economic activity often generates growth in the communities where the museums are located.

According to AAM, museums also rank among the top three family vacation destinations. Trips including cultural and heritage activities comprise one of the most popular and significant segments of the travel industry, accounting for over 23% of all domestic trips. Visitors to historic sites and cultural attractions, including museums, stay 53% longer and spend 36% more money than other kinds of tourists.

Museums, like public libraries, “provide many social services, including programs for children on the autism spectrum, English as a Second Language classes, and programs for older adults with Alzheimer’s or other cognitive impairments.” These institutions also “facilitate job training programs, provide vegetable gardens for low-income communities, and serve as locations for supervised visits through the family court system.”

The December 2009 brief paper, [Service Trends in U.S. Public Libraries](#), posted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, reported that “[m]any individuals visit libraries to receive free income tax preparation help from nonprofit organizations that choose public libraries as sites because of their value as public spaces. Libraries also conduct onsite programs that support English language learners. Elementary and secondary school students visit libraries to receive homework help from tutors onsite as well as online, where libraries often contract with homework help services so that their patrons do not have to pay fees to access such services. Additionally, libraries continue to support adult literacy, either by directly offering classes or referring patrons to such courses.”

Quality of life issues matter to businesses when they want to relocate, and access to cultural resources and a dynamic cultural community are both important factors. In fact, according to research cited by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, “It has been shown that the nonprofit arts and culture industry generates over \$166 billion in economic activity annually, supports over 5.7 million full time jobs, and returns over \$12 billion in federal income taxes annually. Governments which support the arts on average see a return on investment of over \$7 in taxes for every \$1 that the government appropriates.”

To develop a mini economic impact statement for your institution, AAM suggests you fill out the following form. The results will provide a numerical sketch of your contribution to the local economy. The information is useful to your supporters as well as to elected officials, as it allows them to easily calculate the economic benefit of your organization to the district.

- My organization employs *[number]* people in our community.
- My organization spends \$*[annual budget]* each year on goods and services in our community.
- My organization serves *[number]* visitors each year, including *[percentage]*% from out of town.
- My organization serves *[number]* schoolchildren each year through school visits to museums.
- My organization charges an admission fee: \$*[fee]* for adults; \$*[fee]* for children; and \$*[fee]* for senior citizens.
- My organization receives approximately \$*[amount]* from national grant-making foundations and agencies every year.
- My organization is served by *[number]* volunteers, who contribute *[number]* hours of service every year.

The Mechanics of Letter Writing

Whenever possible, type your letter using a computer. Aim to keep your letter short, condensing the header, salutation, body, signature, and list of enclosures, if any, to a single page. If your organization does not have stationery with letterhead, use standard size, 8.5 inch x 11 inch, plain white or off-white paper, folded in thirds to fit a letter-size envelope. If your letter will include brochures or other larger enclosures, use a mailer envelope slightly larger than your largest enclosure, to reduce creasing.

Advocacy experts suggest you structure the parts of your letter as follows:

1. Begin with the date, the complete address for your representative and a formal salutation.
2. State who you are and who you represent and briefly list your credentials relative to the issue.
3. Explain briefly why you are writing.
4. If a certain bill is involved, cite the correct title or number.
5. Provide specific information about how the topic affects you and others you represent.
6. Provide relevant details about your organization and tell a story or anecdote that brings the issue to life.
7. When appropriate, tie in information on similar organizations when discussing details about your organization.
8. If the representative has supported your concern before, acknowledge it.
9. If necessary, append lists and tables to simplify complex material.
10. If the letter is longer than one page, break up the text and provide subheadings for each section.
11. Close by requesting the action you want taken.
12. Thank the public official for taking the time to read your letter.
13. Ask for a written response with his or her position.
14. Include a complete return address on the letter.

Be persistent—write back and ask for more information if you do not receive a specific response.

Examples

Here are examples of headings and salutations appropriate for letters addressed to the D.C. office of a Senator from Pennsylvania:

October 28, 2013

The Honorable Robert P. Casey, Jr.
U.S. Senate
393 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Pat Toomey
U.S. Senate
248 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Direct the text of your letter to “Dear Senator Casey:” or to “Dear Senator Toomey:”.

Similarly, when writing to a U.S. Representative, begin:

October 28, 2013

The Honorable Robert Brady
102 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Then use the salutation “Dear Representative Brady:”.

When writing to the Chairperson of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, address them as: “Dear Mr. Chairman:” or “Dear Madam Chairwoman:” and “Dear Mr. Speaker:” or “Dear Madam Speaker:”.

When identifying legislation, use these identifiers:

- House Bills: "H.R. _____"
- House Resolutions: "H.RES. _____"
- House Joint Resolutions: "H.J.RES. _____"
- Senate Bills: "S. _____"
- Senate Resolutions: "S.RES. _____"
- Senate Joint Resolutions: "S.J.RES. _____"

Sample Letter

Below is a sample letter prepared by the Pennsylvania Humanities Council (PHC) in support of level funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities for 2014 and for the support of state humanities councils. This particular letter was drafted on behalf of organizations that had benefited from PHC programs or grants, so it differs slightly from the format recommended above. It states a common cause shared by the organizations and acknowledges the benefits resulting from funding of the National Endowment for the Humanities. For more details about advocacy activities by PHC, see <http://www.pahumanities.org/engagement/advocacy.php>.

[Date]

[Legislator Title and Name]

[Legislator address]

Dear *[Legislator Title and Last Name]*:

[Insert your own story here of how you have been supported or touched by PHC programs]

Since 1973, Pennsylvania Humanities Council (PHC) has impacted the lives of Pennsylvanians across the state. It has provided people from all walks of life the essential tools to learn, innovate and engage with one another. Programs such as Teen Reading Lounge, Commonwealth Speakers, and Humanities Grants to Pennsylvanians across the commonwealth bring the community together to discover something new about history, the arts, and the world around us. The humanities are powerful stories that explore big ideas. The humanities embrace the power of big ideas to open minds and build a better future.

PHC provides critical support for local museums, historical societies, public libraries, and cultural organizations across the state. Without PHC, critical reading programs in local libraries would disappear. Individuals and underserved communities would not experience historical exhibitions and living history programs. Access to programs that engage and enlighten children and families would be greatly reduced.

Public programs in the humanities help foster an understanding and appreciation of communities and cultural differences. It is this sharing of customs and traditions that connects us to our past and to one another. It is those connections that lead to life-long learning through conversations and experiences.

I am writing you today to ask for your support for the National Endowment for the Humanities' budget, which helps fund the programs provided by Pennsylvania Humanities Council. **Please support level funding of \$154.255 million for the National Endowment for the Humanities and \$44 million for the state humanities councils in 2014.** Your action now will prevent the reduction of vital humanities programs throughout Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,

[Your Signature]

[Your Name]

[Your complete address and phone number]