

How To Engage with Legislators and Public Officials

Finding Your Federal Representatives

The United States Congress is composed of the United States Senate and the United States House of Representatives. These are federal offices. As a constituent, you are represented by a member of the U.S. House of Representatives and by two U.S. Senators. It is important you know who represents you so that you can communicate with them on the issues you care about.

- **Your Representative:** First, you need to know what congressional district you live in and what member of Congress is responsible for that district. A quick and easy way to do this is to visit www.house.gov. This site will ask for your zip code and once you enter it, you will be told the congressional district in which you live and the name and photograph of your Congressperson. You will also be linked directly to that Congressperson's website where you can learn how to contact the member and their stance on the issues.
- **Your Senators:** Every state has two U.S. Senators representing the people of that state. You can go to www.senate.gov and there is a tab "Find Your Senators" that will allow you to enter the state in which you live and will tell you the names of your two senators.
- **The President:** The President of the United States invites the public to communicate on any given issue and White House staff is well-equipped to respond to citizen concerns and questions. If you would like to know more about the Administration's actions or stance on a particular topic, the easiest way to find out is to go to www.whitehouse.gov.

If you prefer to gather information via the telephone you can call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard and ask to be connected to your member's office. That number is **(202) 224-3121**. The operator will ask for your zip code and then connect you with your members of Congress.

State and Local Governments

Local representatives—mayors, state representatives, city or council representatives, school board members—are closest to the people and most attuned to the issues facing the state and locality. In order to be engaged in the issues that will definitely impact your daily life, it is important to know who represents you in your state legislature and closer to home in the mayor's office, county or city councils, and on the school board.

City Level: Most cities have an elected mayor and members of a city council. You can call or email these officeholders and express your concerns and opinions. You can do an online search for you city's website for their email addresses. Your local public school will also have a website that will list the emails for the superintendent and school board.

State: Almost every state has a bicameral legislature, which means there is an "upper" house, which is smaller and consists of state senators, and another body that is larger and most frequently called the House of Representatives. There is an online resource at www.openstates.org that offers an easy way to discover your state representatives by typing in your home address. This site also allows you to monitor the legislation that is being considered in your state.

County: With the exception of a few states, most states divide their territories into counties. These counties have councils that direct the activities within the state. Council members are elected by their constituents. There are some states without county structures and instead have "boroughs" or "parishes." In order to learn more about the local governance structure in your state, a good place to begin is your state's generalized information page, an example would be www.statename.gov. These websites offer information about the state's governing structures, demographics, tax record, motor vehicle information and much more.

How to Engage

When you reach out to your representative, it's best to **make it personal!**

- First, introduce yourself and tell them that you are a constituent. This matters to them. It tells them you are a voter. Be respectful and polite but do not apologize for asking them for assistance. It's their job!
- Second, tell them your story in a concise way. Decide ahead of time what you want to communicate so that you can explain things clearly and tell them the specifics of the issue that concerns you.

- Third, ask them to follow up with you. You can ask to have the name of a Legislative Assistant that can help you in the future.
- Fourth, follow up. If you spoke to a representative in person, follow up with a note summarizing the issue and asking for a follow-up call or letter.
- Enlist others in your community to reach out as well and carry your message. There is safety in numbers but numbers also get attention. Encourage your friends, neighbors, and others in your community who might be affected by the issue to join you in reaching out.