

## *A Brief and Common-Sense Guide on Being an Effective Legislative Advocate*

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To communicate a point of view about a piece of legislation to a legislator effectively, one must understand some very basic facts of political and legislative life:

A legislator is also a politician, which means he or she won an election from a very specific constituency. Therefore, we must look at the elements which became factors in that individual's success. First, there is the ego. Ego is not necessarily bad, but it is an essential component for a person to be willing to go through the process of facing the public, getting nominated and elected, making decisions that may directly affect millions of people, then doing it over and over again. In doing so, candidates soon find that there are many opponents, including the media and organizations who do not hesitate to be highly critical no matter what course of action is taken by the legislator. It can easily become personal to the individual and to the candidate's family.

Add to that is the enormous amount of time and effort in raising campaign funds, campaigning itself, serving in the Legislature and in meeting with constituents, lobbyists, staff, other legislators, media, etc. Then add the traveling back and forth. The work never ends. The responsibilities are significant and cannot be avoided.

What basic things do legislators expect from advocates?

1. Respect. A democratic society requires the election of individuals who will take responsibility for determining public policy. Someone must do it and be prepared to contend with the consequences. He or she volunteered to run for office and therefore, cannot complain, but neither should they be denigrated for doing so. They, in fact, should be respected.
2. Appreciation. Even if a legislator takes an adverse position on some issues, he or she provided time (a non-renewable resource) and consideration in meeting with the proponents and opponents. Just because there may be disagreement about one issue doesn't mean that other issues will also be in dispute. There is always tomorrow. Say "thank you" often and mean it.
3. Assistance. Assisting a candidate in getting elected is a highly effective way of providing assistance. However, assistance to a legislator can also take the form of providing information about legislative issues and organizations that may be involved. It could also include helping out with mailings, drafting constituent responses and assisting in local fund-raising.

In addition to knowing more about your legislator and the way he or she became one, you should also know something about the constituency that sent that legislator to Springfield. The first fact is that there are at least 210,000 people in each Senate District and 105,000 in each Representative District. That is more people than live in most Illinois cities. With that many people to represent, it means there will be a wide variety of issues, interests and problems to contend with. There is also local history, political and otherwise, that must be taken into consideration.

What I want to convey is that a legislator in the complex State of Illinois has a very demanding job and it is an unrelenting one. (However, most of the legislators want to be re-elected.)

Although Illinois has historically been a two-party State, it doesn't mean that every issue is a partisan one. In fact, most bills in the General Assembly that come to a vote do so with support from both parties. The partisan issues receive the most publicity, but are relatively few in number.

### Springfield

For most legislators what goes on in Springfield during a legislative session is far different than what may happen during the rest of the year. In fact, the General Assembly will be in session only 80-90 days every year. However, those days are intense ones with long hours and a considerable amount of pressure from a variety of sources. They include their party leaders, statewide officials, officials back in the District, personnel from State agencies like the Dept. of Transportation and Dept. of Human Services, professional lobbyists representing the many organizations with significant public policy interests, legislative staff and the media. All have to be responded to – often at the same time. There are always more things to do than there is time to do them.

## **15 Do's and Don'ts**

1. For meetings, be punctual, and don't over-stay your time.
2. Be polite and respectful. Do not get into an argument.
3. Don't criticize any legislator, politician, interest group or lobbyist.
4. If you say you will do something, do it, or provide the reason for not.
5. Provide information as to organizations who support your position and those who don't, but be sure it's accurate.
6. Do not leave the impression that you are unwilling to meet with your opponents to try to find "common ground."
7. If your issue costs money, say so.
8. Follow up with information and an expression of appreciation for the legislator's time.
9. Don't make threats. If you make a promise, deliver it!
10. Do not be reluctant about talking to a legislator because you think he or she will ask you something you may not know. Most you will know more about the issue than the legislator does. However, if a question is asked and you are unsure of the answer, find it and provide it.
11. Provide a Fact Sheet and information as to where the legislator can find additional information.
12. If your organization is represented in Springfield by a lobbyist, be sure to mention the name of that person.
13. Do not complain about the legislative process – try to understand it, difficult as that may be.
14. Before the end of your meeting, be sure to ask the legislator whether he or she will support your position. If "yes," express appreciation; if any other response, tell the legislator you will provide additional information, do so and then follow-up.
15. Avoid saying anything that could be construed to indicate the exchange of campaign support for a vote.