

Tips for Talking with Legislators

Remember that a legislator is a person like you. They have family, they have ailments, they have a favorite food, and probably a favorite color. Do not be intimidated to talk with them. Be confident in your position as an expert in your field, and a constituent in their district. Their job is to represent your interests at the local, state or federal level, so they should care about what you have to say. We are experts in what we do and we have the tools to inform them about conservation in Indiana.

First determine how you want to make contact with your legislator. In-person meetings are the most effective way of communicating (it is easier to remember a face than a name!). Most likely the first contact will be a phone call to their office. Keep in mind that you will most likely talk to, and even possibly meet with, a staff person first. Be polite and respectful of a legislator's staff. They often have your legislator's ear and are often knowledgeable about the main issues. They may even be willing to provide you with information down the road based on a good working relationship.

Meeting in Person

- Keep it short and simple: When you meet be brief and concise. Try not to speak in metaphor or tell a long story, rather explain why you are there, why the legislator should care, and what you want. Go with a short list of bullet points you want to communicate, and be sure to hit the important points.
- Have any facts you want to communicate straight. Spend time reading through materials (like the CWI fact sheet and talking points) beforehand so you are familiarized with the information. Talk about how the legislator's constituents benefit from what you want. And importantly, if the legislator asks you something you don't know, don't guess; find out the information and provide it later.
- If you are with a group, it may be best to designate a single person as a spokesperson to communicate the main points. Be sure introduce the members of the group, and note the connection each person has to your District, the issue, or the connection to the legislator's district.
- Dress appropriately and formal: show that you take our issues seriously and are giving up time to discuss them with your legislator. Be on time, be patient and be polite. The quickest way to lose support is by being rude to a legislator. They may be busy with other committee meetings or deadlines, so they may be late to any meeting. Be appreciative of the time you get with your legislator, and be sure to thank them for taking time to meet with you.
- Make the issue personal. How does the issue impact your District? How does the inability of the District to do a good job impact other constituents in your county (their district)? Talk about something that makes your District a successful community asset, but also talk about how a lack of funding/support hinders your District as well.
- Be a resource for your legislator. Leave talking points or the CWI fact sheet with them, a local District handout, and provide your contact information for any follow up questions. If they need or ask for more information, be sure to be reliable and follow up with the information requested. Follow up after your meeting/call, even if they didn't ask for more information.

- End your discussion with a polite thank you. But, also be direct and ask if you can count on them to support our cause. Use their answer to inform your future interactions and efforts with them.
- Make a note of your meeting and report back to the State Association. Our strength lies in the number of Member Districts and constituents we make up for legislators. Allow us to use that strength by sharing information with the larger organization to inform our strategy. Afterward, jot down any impressions and any specific statements of opposition or support.
- Continue your relationship with your legislator after your meeting/conversation. Afterward, promptly send a note thanking your legislator for their time and give any additional information about your District that may be of interest. Don't be afraid to invite them to an upcoming field day or your Annual meeting, even if they don't seem supportive.

Specifics for Calling Legislators

- When contacting your legislator's office, if you speak with a staff member, be sure to state who you are, your position and how it relates to the issue you want to address. Be sure to take down the name of the staff person speaking with you, and be sure to thank them as well. Developing a relationship with a legislator's staff is another way to reach them.
- Know what you want to say and be brief. It is good to have notes or talking points in front of you, and have any additional information nearby for easy access. Try not to keep the legislator or their staff on the phone longer than five minutes unless they prolong the conversation. Use the time wisely and cover your main points as close to the beginning of the conversation as possible.
- Make sure you leave them with your contact information: your name, phone number, email address, and address. If you do not speak with a legislator, make sure to let them know that you want a reply.
- Just as with an in-person meeting, follow up a phone call with a note of thanks and short and concise summary of our issues and any additional information that may have been requested. This is how you develop a relationship!
- Don't bluff or BS a legislator or their staff. If they ask you a question that you cannot answer, be honest that you cannot answer their question, but state that you will follow up with an answer. And then MAKE SURE TO FOLLOW UP!
- Don't be afraid to be persistent. If you did not receive a reply, or do not get a straight answer, follow up to get a specific response. You do not need to be rude, but convey that you want to know their position on your issue.
- If your legislator does not support your position, let him or her know that you are aware of that and explain why you think they should decide differently. Don't alienate your legislator or be condescending: pay attention to your tone. Keep in mind that you need to establish a relationship as their constituent and it becomes difficult if you lose their respect.

Writing to a Legislator

- Use the correct salutation: Dear Senator (name), or Dear Representative (name).
- Make sure your letter is typed clearly and easy to read, and be sure to include your return address.

- Use your District or own stationary to personalize the letter, and use your own words to personalize the message. Rather than a form letter, personal letters show more commitment to the issue on your part.
- Make sure to keep the message focused, and not lose it in a laundry list of items. Make sure to be brief and succinct, and hit the main points you want to get across.
- Be specific as possible. Show how the issue impacts your District, and the legislator's constituents.
- Know your facts and be accurate and honest in your letter. You can hurt your credibility by offering inaccurate information, and once it is written down and cannot be taken back.
- Personalize your letter if possible. If you know they have supported CWI or your District in the past, express your thanks.
- Be timely and do not wait to contact your legislator for the first time right before you want them to consider a request or act on an issue.
- Even in writing, be sure to say "thank you" and express your appreciation for their time considering your request. While you don't need to be too formal or use big words, be professional in your writing and respectful in your tone and choice of words.

If you feel like a legislator wants more information than you feel like you and your District can provide, don't worry. Contact the State Association and we can assist you with a strategy to follow up with them!