

## Contacting Public Policy Leaders

In building and maintaining positive relationships with public leaders, there are five main ways to communicate: personal visits, handwritten or typed personal letters, phone calls, faxes, and e-mail. As you get to know a public policy leader, you will quickly learn which way he or she prefers to communicate.

### Personal Visits

Meeting with a public policy leader in person often is the most effective way to communicate about an issue. In particular, visits in a public policy leader's home district are most productive. You do not need to be an expert on an issue, just a reasonably informed and concerned citizen able to articulate your views and what you want to see happen. Guidelines for effective personal visits include the following:

- Schedule an appointment at least three to four weeks in advance. Explain your purpose and who you represent.
- Limit the number of people you bring to the meeting and decide who your spokesperson will be.
- Know the issue and any relevant legislation. Share supporting facts or a short anecdote to demonstrate the connection between your concern and how it affects local citizens.
- Expect your meeting to last about 15 minutes. If the opportunity presents itself, continue meeting with staff assistants. These people often are the most knowledgeable about an issue and can be very helpful.
- Be prepared to answer questions or provide supporting material. A one-page fact sheet outlining your concerns is appropriate.
- Follow up with a thank you letter summarizing the key points of your meeting.

### Letters/Faxes

Taking the time to write a short, concise letter shows sincerity and thoughtfulness. A handwritten letter is best if it is legible. Form letters are not appropriate. Because of Sept. 11, 2001, it now takes up to three weeks to process mail for public policy leaders. You may need to fax your letter if time is an issue. Guidelines for effective personal letters include the following:

- Limit your letter to one page and one topic. Use business or personal stationary as appropriate.
- Aim for three paragraphs with the following elements:
  - Mention any recent contact you may have had with the public policy leader.
  - State your reason for writing and give your credentials.
  - Provide an objective description of the issue, including its impact, and cite relevant facts to support your position.
  - Include the bill name and title, if applicable.
  - List your home address and phone number.
- It can be more effective and timely to address your letter to the public policy leader's district or local office. When addressing correspondence, use "The Honorable" before the person's name. Your salutation should include the appropriate title before his or her name.

## **E-mail**

There is mixed opinion as to the effectiveness of e-mail when communicating with public policy leaders. Like the general population, public policy leaders have mixed experience using technology and may not be able to efficiently handle your message. E-mail communication may be most appropriate as a follow-up measure or when time is short. Guidelines for effective e-mails include the following:

- Follow the same suggestions as for a personal letter. For the subject line, identify your message by topic or bill number.
- Your message should include your name and mailing address.
- Follow up your message with a personal letter and/or supporting materials sent via U. S. mail.

## **Phone Calls**

Telephone calls are most appropriate when time is of the essence or if you know a public policy leader personally. Public policy leaders typically tally the number of calls they get on an issue and may also note what callers are saying. Guidelines for effective phone calls include the following:

- Ask for the staff member who handles your particular issue. Identify yourself and the issue you wish to comment on. Concisely state your position.
- Remember to be polite. Sound self-possessed, confident, reasonable, and alert.

## **Forwarding Testimonials to Public Policy Leaders**

One of the most effective ways to build and maintain positive relationships with public policy leaders is to share how an issue impacts local citizens. In many cases, the best testimonials come from clients or partners who have actually benefited from an Extension program or service. When people tell you that they have benefited from Extension, encourage them to share their experience with their public policy leaders. Provide clients and partners postcards or envelopes pre-addressed with a public policy leader's address, or have copies of his or her address available. Share with them the following guidelines for effective testimonials:

- Hand write testimonials and keep them short. State your desire to develop a working relationship around issues of mutual concern.
- Make a point. Use everyday words and focus on the outcome. Don't get lost explaining the process. Read the testimonial aloud to make sure it "sounds" well-written.
- Enclose a business card or a home address and phone number.
- If you will attend an event at which a public policy leader will be present, give your testimonial in person. Keep it under 30 seconds and rehearse your delivery.
- Track issues of mutual concern in the media, and then communicate. For example, add a personal note to a newspaper clipping and send it to the public policy leader.
- Send copies of your testimonials to your area and program directors. If a client or a partner sends a public policy leader a testimonial, ask for a copy and forward it to your area and program directors.