

Tips for Talking with Your Legislator

The New Mexico Pediatric Society is asking clinicians around the state to reach out to their elected officials to support its *Agenda for New Mexico's Children*. State legislators, especially, are key partners in the effort to prioritize children's health in New Mexico. Successful implementation of the *Agenda* will depend on this partnership.

Your goal is to develop an ongoing, personal relationship with your legislators and their office staff, so that they come to see you as an expert they can turn to for information and advice about children's health.

- *Know your legislator:* Identify the legislators (representative and senator) who represent you, any special interest areas or expertise they may have, bills they may have sponsored, how they have voted on previous bills, and which legislative committees they sit on (and for how long).
 - The New Mexico Legislature maintains an easy-to-use database of state senators and representatives that contains most of this information. To find your legislators and their contact information, see: https://nmlegis.gov/Members/Find_My_Legislator
 - After you have identified your legislators by name, perform an internet search and search your local newspaper for articles about them. A quick, 5-minute web search can yield a host of information about their stance on many issues. Use this information to prepare your approach to a conversation.

The Conversation

Here are some tips for having a conversation with your legislator:

- *Know the issues.* Select two or three talking points and provide facts and figures to back up your position. Refer to the talking points and other materials on the push card.
- *Make an appointment.* Call or email and request an appointment with your legislator to talk about prioritizing children's health.
- *Be specific.* As you prepare for the meeting, write down the specific things you want to accomplish during the meeting.
- *Be timely.* Be on time for the appointment, but be patient if your legislator encounters unexpected delays.
- *Start positive.* Start the conversation with a meaningful, positive comment. For example, thank the legislator for something she or he has done to support children.
- *Identify the issue.* "I would like to talk about XXX."
- *Present yourself as an expert resource.* As a clinician who works daily with children, you *are* an expert. Remind the legislator that you are there to serve as resource. Act like a partner, not an opponent.
- *Don't expect your legislator to know all of the issues.* Remember that legislators deal with hundreds of issues, from building roads to dog leash laws. Do not assume that she or he knows the challenges that children and families face in New Mexico or their impact on your community and the state. Take the time to educate him or her.
- *Use stories:* Share anecdotes or stories (withholding names of patients and other protected patient information, of course) if it helps to make your point.

- *Emphasize children.* Remember that you are not the only person with a good cause. Emphasize that prioritizing children’s health helps just about every other cause in the state, from economic development to climate change.
- *Don’t argue.* If your legislator disagrees with you, don’t debate or give ultimatums such as “I won’t vote for you if you do not support my position.” Respect the legislator’s right to disagree with you.
- *Know the competition.* Your legislator is constantly dealing with limited resources and unlimited need. Remind him or her that children in New Mexico fare worse than in any other state on many measures, and supporting children is essential for the future of New Mexico. It is more costly not to support children than it is to provide them with the services outlined in the *Agenda*.
- *Don’t monopolize the conversation.* Make your points, but also let your legislator talk and listen carefully.
 - Taking notes can help you remember what was said and also gives evidence that you are paying attention.
 - Respect the legislator’s knowledge of the issue and respond to questions asked. If you cannot answer, admit it, and offer to find the answer. This will give you another opportunity to visit, call, or write, thus developing a continuing relationship.
 - Offer to leave useful statistics, charts, or data, or to send more information. Most importantly, offer literature that educates the legislator on the issue.
- *Leave written materials.* Leave your business card and a copy of the *Agenda*.
- *Say thank you.* A day or two after your conversation, send a thank-you note reiterating your main points.
- *Follow up.* Follow up with your legislator periodically. Ongoing contact is needed to encourage action.

Other Ways to Communicate with Your Legislators

You may also wish to use other means of communication, including telephone calls, letters, e-mails, and faxes.

Telephone Calls

Telephone calls can be an effective and quick means to reach your legislator, although they don’t provide the same sense of personal contact that a face-to-face meeting can. They are more useful after a personal visit has been made. You will most likely reach an aide through a phone call to the office, but your call can still be effective.

Remember that, in New Mexico, legislative offices are only staffed during the legislative session (which begins in mid-January and lasts for either 30 or 60 days). So you are likely going to reach a legislator on their home, work or cell phone. Be aware that they may be in the middle of dealing with something that has nothing to do with legislation.

Suggestions for making effective phone calls include:

- *Identify yourself*, reminding the legislator of a previous meeting or contact.

- *Be brief:* State your business clearly, concisely and courteously. It often helps to prepare a written list of talking points you would like to discuss.
- *Listen as well as talk:* If the aide or legislator responds substantively, listen carefully. If he or she asks you a question and you do not have the answer, say you will investigate further and call back.
- *Say thank you.* Thank your legislator for their time and consideration.
- *Follow up.* Follow up with a letter restating the points of the call, especially if you must leave a message with an aide.

Letters

Letters can provide legislators with an easy-to-access record of your statements. Commonly, legislators keep a file of all the mail they receive on every bill and review it carefully when the bill comes to the floor for a vote. A legislator may read portions of a well-written letter aloud during committee hearings or floor debate. A few persuasive letters may determine how a legislator votes.

Suggested strategies for writing letters to your legislator:

- Write on personal or business letterhead (with employer approval).
- Check the spelling of your legislator's name, and address him or her properly (The Honorable...).
- Identify your topic immediately. For example, "I am writing to encourage your support of the Children's Cabinet."
- Refer to the entire *Agenda*, but stick to two or three talking points.
- Explain why the two points you have chosen are important to New Mexico's children and the future of the state.
- Back your position with reliable facts, figures, and personal experience.
- Be yourself. Use your own words. Avoid jargon and clichés.
- Keep your letter to one page.
- Thank your legislator for other votes that have supported children's well-being.
- Sign your name legibly. Include your return address in your letter in case the envelope is discarded.

E-mails

All New Mexico legislators have a legislative e-mail address. However, not all of them use e-mail so their e-mail queue may only be checked by a staffer when the Legislature is in session. All of the above letter-writing tips apply to e-mails (except for using letterhead, of course). One advantage to using e-mail (aside from the speed) is that you can include hyperlinks to the *Agenda* and other supporting material so your legislator can do further reading if he or she chooses to.

Need help? Email executivedirector@nmaap.org for support in reaching your legislators or crafting your message.