

# **TIPS WHEN CONTACTING POLICYMAKERS**

## **WHO ARE POLICYMAKERS?**

- LOCAL:** Mayor & City Council Members  
Board of Supervisors  
All the local governmental department heads
- STATE:** Governor  
Iowa Senate  
Iowa House of Representatives  
All the state governmental department heads
- FEDERAL:** President  
U.S. Senate  
U.S. House of Representatives  
All the federal governmental department heads

## **QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR SELF BEFORE YOU**

## **CONTACT POLICYMAKERS:**

- **Will you do self-advocacy (work on the issue by yourself), or will you work with other people (in a group) to solve this problem?**  
NOTE: Almost all advocacy is more effective when done in a group (for this reason, we will assume that you will be working with a group when dealing with policymakers)!!
- **What do you want the policymaker to do for you?**
- **Are you going to tackle an issue at the local, state or federal level?**  
NOTE: If you are having a tough time deciding where an issue starts, follow the funding streams (in other words – where do the most tax dollars come from?)  
NOTE: Most individuals and small groups – with less 20 active members – tend to work on local issues
- **Should there be a “Planning Team” meeting to see if there is interest in the issue?**
- **How many people do you want on the “Planning Team?” Who SHOULD be at a planning meeting? Who MUST be there? Should it be a face-to-face planning meeting, or can it be a phone conference call?**  
NOTE: In most cases, it is better to have other groups collaborate with you when “circling the wagons” on a big issue.  
NOTE: Location is important especially if it is a collaborative group – consider holding planning meetings in a neutral location.

NOTE: Using a conference call as an option, can be expensive for small groups – also, it can be difficult for shy members to make their points on a conference call since the leader can't see everyone on the call (and therefore doesn't know who to call on unless people are vocal).

- **Who will be best people to work with with-in your group? Will the issue be best resolved with a small of people, or a coalition of groups?**
- **How many people do you want involved in the actual of contacting the policymakers?**
- **Who will be the very best person or people to push your issue forward – and under what circumstances (formal meeting or “on the golf-course”)?**

**Do you really need face-to-face time with the policymaker? Or, can you do it just as well over the phone (or via email or letter)?**

NOTE: Squeezing in another face-to-face meeting can be very difficult for policymakers in certain positions, or at certain times of the year (e.g.: when the Iowa Legislature in session). Here's another example – you can generally get in to see your US Representative at lot faster than you can reach your US Senator – that's because we four Congressional Districts in Iowa – see map to the right and the Senators each serve the entire state.



(The Iowa Congressional Map after the 2010 Census is not available in alternative formats.)

## QUESTIONS TO ASK **WHILE YOU MAKE** **PLANS TO MEET POLICYMAKERS:**

- **Does your meeting have a leader (a “Chairperson”)? And, a note taker (a “Secretary”)?**  
NOTE: You may also need a treasurer if money is involved.
- **Does your group have a roster of those who are involved in the project and those who should be involved in the meetings?**
- **Do you have an agenda (normally completed by the leader) for every meeting?**  
NOTE: The Agenda should be sent out (by email or US Mail) at least one week before the meeting (or as agreed to by the Members).
- **Do you have a schedule of meetings – if not, do this by the end of the first meeting – with a logical place to meet.**
- **Does your planning meetings have purpose? Does EVERYONE AGREE with the purpose?**
- **Does your Team have a “WORK-PLAN”?**

NOTE: A work-plan outlines the following kinds of things:

- **An over-arching goal (sometimes determined by a grant project)**
- **The objectives (or deliverables)**
- **Timelines for each objective (or deliverable) – including end-date**
- **Who is responsible for each objective (or deliverable)**
- **A budget (including income and expenses, donations & in-kind)**

NOTE: Your WORK-PLAN should include a one-page flier discussing the group's history, the issue, your concerns, the solution & your contact info.

## **DO THESE THINGS BEFORE YOU MEET WITH**

## **POLICYMAKERS:**

- **Be prepared!!**
  - Make sure your print-material is well-organized, well-written, looking sharp, put-together well, etc.
  - Know your stuff – Know the who's, what's, when's, where's, how's, and why's!!
  - Know what has been done before – did it work?? Why or why not??
  - Have statistics and other information to back up your case.
- **MAKE SURE YOU KNOW YOUR STUFF!! You do this by PRACTICE – PRACTICE – PRACTICE! Practice in front of a mirror. Practice with other people. Practice as a group.**
  - Who is the leader of the group? Who makes introductions?
  - Who will say what, and in what order?
  - Who will hand-off the materials?
  - What happens if someone can't make it? Who will step it to the role?
  - MOST IMPORTANT – who will answer the **TOUGH QUESTIONS** that policymakers will ask your group (**who is the EXPERT on your issue from your group**), like?
    - “How much will this cost?”
    - “Cost per person?”
    - “Admin Costs?”
- **BRIEFLY & CLEARLY define your group. What do you do? 30-60 seconds**
- **BRIEFLY & CLEARLY tell your group's accomplishments. 30-60 seconds**
- **BRIEFLY & CLEARLY talk about this issue. 30-60 seconds for short overview of your issue**
  - Introduce your group and your issue (pass out business cards)
  - Tell why this issue is important to you? **SHOW YOUR PASSION!!**
  - Tell policymakers who the issue affects? (give numbers & demographics)
  - Share your personal story – make it personal
  - Tell policymakers what you want to see happen – share “the solution”
  - Pass off your one-page flier with most of this info

- **THANK POLICYMAKERS FOR THEIR TIME** when leaving the meeting even if they agreed to do **NOTHING FOR YOUR CAUSE!!!!!!**
- **Follow-up with a thank-you letter (or email if appropriate) immediately** even if they agreed to do **NOTHING FOR YOUR CAUSE!!!!!!**
- **STICK TO YOUR PLAN!!**

**Remember – most policymakers want to help you, but you must tell them what you want them to do.**

## **WHEN YOU MEET WITH POLICYMAKERS:**

- **BE POLITE!!** Above all else, even if a policymaker says:
  - “I’m sorry, I can’t help you,”
  - “I’ll look into it” (even though you know they don’t plan to),
  - Or if you feel you are getting the run around, you still must be polite!!
- **Time is of the essence – you will have less time with a policymaker than you think.** It seems as if they start meetings late, and end meetings early – don’t take offense at this!
- **It is OK to ask questions of policymakers, like:**
  - “You are the expert in this issue! What can be done to move it along?”
  - “Can you help us to \_\_\_\_\_?” (be specific)
  - “Is there a way that we could \_\_\_\_\_?” (be specific)
- **The office staff (or legislative aides) for policymakers are generally really good people, and can help to answer your questions if a meeting gets canceled, or if it is running really late.** They can even help you with your cause by getting you to the right person. Here are a couple of questions to ask staff if your meeting is running really, really late:
  - EXAMPLE #1: “We have another meeting to go to in about 15 minutes, would you have any ideas for us?”
  - EXAMPLE #2: “How can we get our information to the Congressmen, as we made a special trip here to see him? Can you help us?”

### **Bonner Curriculum: Meeting Your Congressperson**

**Adapted for the USA-Iowa TOOLKIT 2014 with permission**

ID ACTION | A project of the Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council  
P.O. Box 71369 | Des Moines, IA 50325