

LEGISLATIVE TIPS FROM IFAPA

How to Effectively Contact & Communicate with Your Legislators

The most effective means of communicating with your legislators is through direct contact, at a public meeting, in the state house or by email or on the phone. Legislators are generally very willing to meet or speak with constituents.

1. Consider yourself an information source. Legislators have limited time, staff, and interest on any one issue. They can't be as informed as they might like to be on all the issues, including the issues that concern you. You have expertise, so share it.
2. Let your legislators know how funding, services, and supports affect the children in your care. You do not need to divulge details due to confidentiality, but explain what assistance – financial and services- means to your family.
3. Tell the truth. There is no faster way to lose credibility than to give false or misleading information to a legislator.
4. Know who else is on your side. It is helpful for a legislator to know what other groups, individuals, state agencies and/or legislators support your cause. Invite legislators to your support group.
5. Make the legislator aware of any personal connection you may have. No matter how insignificant you may feel it is, if you have friends, relatives or colleagues in common, let them know.
6. Don't be afraid to admit you don't know something. If a legislator wants information you don't have or asks something you don't know, offer to get the information for them. IFAPA can provide those details.
7. Be specific. If you want a vote, information, answers to a question -whatever it is, make sure you ask for it directly and request an answer.
8. Follow up. It is important to find out if your legislator did what was promised. It is also important that you thank them if they supported your cause or voted for legislation in support of your cause.
9. Don't "burn any bridges." It is easy to get emotional over issues. That's fine, but be sure that no matter what happens you don't permanently alienate a legislator. Your strongest opponent on one issue may be an ally on another.

Remember – you have a right to be heard. Your tax money pays legislators' salaries, pays for the paper they write on, and the phone they use to call you. They are responsible to you, and will be grateful for your input.

Many families say they want to talk to policymakers about changes in the system, but they don't know what to say or how to start the conversation.

Introduce yourself, and connect yourself to the policymaker, if possible. Examples: Hello, my name is John Smith, and I live in your district in Council Bluffs. Hi, my name is Jane Jones, and our children are in Sunday School together.

Thank the policymaker for his or her work. Examples: Thank you for your work on behalf of families in Iowa. Thank you for voting against the recent budget cuts.

Position yourself as a resource on foster care and/or adoption. Examples: I'm an adoptive mom of two children. I have been a foster parent in Ames for 10 years.

Tell the legislator one or two facts or issues important to you. Give examples to illustrate the facts and help them **see and feel** the issue. Example: My son, who was born to a mother who abused drugs during her pregnancy, started having explosive rages a few months ago. He got kicked out of daycare, and I quit work to care for him at home. Our doctor recommended we see a child psychiatrist, but we've been on the waitlist for three months. There aren't enough providers in our area, and for kids and families in crisis, three months is much too long to wait. I'd like to see the legislature increase Medicaid reimbursement rates to providers, so perhaps more people would see kids on Title XIX. Families really need the help.

Ask permission to contact the legislator, and ask if they prefer to be contacted by phone or e-mail. Offer to be a resource on foster care/adoption/kinship (whatever your expertise) issues. Provide your contact information. Example: Here's my business card. I'm always willing to talk more about this issue, if you'd like. I'll also follow-up with a letter. Should I e-mail you or write you? **Be sure to thank the legislator for his or her time.**

Writing an Effective Letter to Your Legislator

- Keep your letters simple and to-the-point.
- Know your legislator. Find out his or her positions on the issues you're focusing on.
- Let them know you are a constituent.
- Choose one or two topics to address, and be specific whenever possible. (Such as voting for a specific bill.)
- Use a key point or short personal story that supports your position.
- Provide local context. If it affects your local community (and thus the legislator's constituents), say so!
- Ask for a commitment.
- Communicate more than once. Follow-up with an e-mail, a call, another letter. Quantity is as important than quality.

To find out who your legislators are and their address, phone number and e-mail address, visit the Legislative Resources section of the IFAPA website.



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