Communicating with Elected Officials

One of the most effective means of advocacy is to communicate directly with those elected to represent you. The only way that they can accurately voice the needs of their constituents is for them to hear from you. The Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council has assembled the following tips to help you to communicate with your elected officials by written letter or email, by phone or in person. Following these tips are key to building lasting relationships with those in office.

10 Tips for Writing an Effective Letter or Email to Your Legislator

1. Locate your legislators via our website. It’s as simple as plugging in your zip code.

2. Use the following salutations to address your legislators:

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<tr>
<th>Local Elected Officials</th>
<th>State / Federal Legislators</th>
<th>Governor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address as:</td>
<td>The Honorable...</td>
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<td>Salutation:</td>
<td>The Honorable...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dear Mayor...</td>
<td>Dear Representative...</td>
<td>Dear Governor...</td>
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<td>Dear Councilman...</td>
<td>Dear Senator...</td>
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<td>Dear Councilwoman...</td>
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3. State your case briefly. Do not ramble, accuse, or use foul language.

4. Outline specific key points, no more than three. For example: “If funding for the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts is reduced, the Pittsburgh Poetry Players will be unable to provide programming for 300 elementary school students in your district.”

5. Tell them what this means to your community, your staff, and you. If your group has had a positive economic impact in your neighborhood, be sure to mention it.

6. Call the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council for demographic or economic research to support your argument.

7. Put in a call for action by telling them what you would like them to do. For example, “please vote for Bill #3”.

8. Say thank you. If your legislator has been supportive of the arts in the past be sure to mention it.

9. Make yourself available to a legislative staff person for follow up questions.

10. Send a copy of the letter or email to the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council.

10 Tips for Communicating with Your Legislators via Telephone

A telephone call is a quick and direct way to reach a legislator’s office. Be prepared to talk with an aide, rather than directly to the legislator. Provide all the necessary details to the aide.

1. Identify yourself. Anonymous calls will be ignored.

2. Identify that you are a constituent. Legislators are primarily interested in hearing from those they represent.
3. Focus on one issue. This is more effective than a long conversation about all the issues on your mind.

4. Be brief. State your purpose for calling in the first few sentences of the conversation. If you are calling about a piece of legislation, identify it appropriately. (Call the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council if you need help doing so.)

5. State your message. Be precise about the action you wish the legislator to take.

6. Include facts and personal experiences briefly. Stress how it affects you, your business, your organization, and your community and provide examples. Personal examples are effective. Adding facts and figures create solid debate.

7. Do not be scolding, preachy or philosophical in your approach. Be practical about the benefits or problems with the legislation in order to make your case. You are not likely to change beliefs with one phone call, but you can change their course of action if they understand the practical implications of the issue for you and your community. Be sure to emphasize the importance of arts and cultural institutions to the constituents of the legislator’s district.

8. Offer your services to provide materials or experiences that will support your position.

9. Provide a phone number, email and mailing address where they can reach you for more information or to send a response. Direct them to the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council for more specific information.

10. Be courteous at all times and thank the aide or legislator for their time. Request a written response to your call. By being polite you are more likely to receive a response.

**Tips for Personal Visits with Legislators**

Personal visits can be one of the most effective methods of communicating with a legislator. Your position is connected with a face, a person, and can be presented with your own choice of emphasis. The personal visit gives you the opportunity to answer questions and find out the areas where you need to provide more research information.

1. Plan the visit carefully and be clear about what you expect to achieve by the visit. Limit the visit to discussion of one issue. Determine which member of the legislator’s staff is charged with information about that issue in case you can’t meet with the legislator directly.

2. Make an appointment. Contact the legislator’s scheduler or appointment secretary to arrange an appointment. Introduce yourself and who you represent, make it known that you are a constituent, and explain your purpose for the meeting.

3. Confirm your appointment the day before to be sure the legislator’s schedule hasn’t changed.

4. Be prompt and patient. Be punctual, but be prepared to wait if the legislator is late or interrupted. If interruptions or schedule changes occur, be flexible and willing to meet with a member of the legislator’s staff.
5. Be positive. If the legislator has been supportive on your issues, thank him/her for his/her support and diligence. If the legislator has not been supportive, thank him/her for meeting with you and hearing your views.

6. Be prepared. Know what the legislator’s opinions are and if possible what their current or past positions have been. Plan your approach using this information and try to plan for the questions that might be asked. Bring paper and pen to take notes during the meeting. Write down questions that need further research, and notes to help you write thank you letters and emails, to prepare for future meetings, and to report to colleagues.

7. Bring information packages and business cards. Legislators may need more facts and information and may lack research on your position or issues. Provide supporting materials for your position along with information about your organization, including posters, brochures, newsletters and other promotional materials. Include contact information with the package.

8. Know your message. Simplify your message so you can deliver your position and a few supporting facts and experiences quickly. In most instances, you will have 15-20 minutes to meet with a legislator or staff member and make your point clear. Rehearse your message for delivery, timing, persuasiveness, and to boost your confidence. Keep in mind that you’ll probably be asked to open the conversation and explain the reason for your visit—use this opportunity to outline your issue and focus your conversation. Don’t let yourself be distracted from your purpose by small talk, but do utilize the flow of conversation to deliver your message.

9. Don’t let yourself be intimidated. You probably know more about your field than your legislator does. You are there to educate and bring awareness to the issue you are concerned about.

10. Be political. The bottom line of a legislator’s politicking is satisfying his/her district. Recognize that legislators want to respond to the interests of their constituents. You provide that opportunity by educating them on another facet of their constituents’ interests.

11. Be responsive. Be prepared to answer questions and to provide additional information. Information and materials you provide may benefit your position in the decision-making process.

12. Always end by thanking a legislator for his/her time and attention. Always follow-up your visits with a thank-you letter and/or email to show you appreciate the opportunity to talk with him/her. A thank-you letter is also an opportunity for you to remind a legislator of you and your message. In the letter, briefly summarize the discussion you had with him/her and provide additional contacts or references. If the legislator takes the action you requested, write a thank you note showing your appreciation for his/her efforts. This serves as a reminder to the legislator that you are paying attention to what they are doing.
10 Steps to Building Lasting Relationships with Your Legislators

1. Long-term relationships are the key to being on a legislator’s radar screen. The more they know about your organization or cause, the more they can respond to your concerns.

2. Write thank you letters when you receive a grant funded by public dollars. Be sure to state the impact that it makes.

3. Get to know the staff - ask them how they would like to receive your materials and information; electronically, fax, or regular mail.

4. Offer to be a resource.

5. Invite them to your events, and not just the black tie ones. Even if they have said no before, tickets should be complimentary. If they do attend try to announce that they are present or feature them as honored guests.

6. Show them something special; for example a backstage tour or your education programs in action.

7. If they have a position on an arts issue, publish it in your newsletter, and let them know you did.

8. Put their staff person who handles arts and culture on your mailing list.

9. Ask your legislator to address your annual meeting.

10. Have an annual face to face meeting; present your points succinctly; give them a piece of art work from your students or poster from your season; arrive and leave punctually; leave a fact sheet behind.