



Things to Think About!



By Brandan Atkin

Need to find the legislators in your state?

<http://www.usa.gov/Agencies.shtml>

Recommended reading:

<http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/uscongress/a/letterscongress.htm>

http://usgovinfo.about.com/c/ht/00/07/How_Write_Letters_Elected0962932964.htm

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Writing Your Elected Officials

By Linda Jorgensen

Editor's Note: Our Federal Congress and state legislators meet every January and February as the main legislative session for the year. Staying in contact with our legislators, congressmen and senators is an important step in ensuring our voices are heard. We are reprinting an updated version of this newsletter as an informational help in writing letters to our politicians. They cannot represent us if we don't tell them how we feel about specific issues or tell them what we need. "One whisper added to a thousand others becomes a roar of discontent that cannot be ignored." ~ Author Unknown

Again, a special Thank You needs to go to Mr. Shawn Fleming, Deputy Director of the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council and Louisiana Citizens for Action Now (LaCAN) for the invaluable information, assistance and permission to, "Use whatever you need." It is greatly appreciated. The sample letter below is used with their permission.

Many people feel that writing a letter to an elected official is simply "too hard". I learned about writing elected officials years ago when my son was a Boy Scout. One of the requirements for his Citizenship in the Community merit badge was to write one of our elected officials. The boys were to choose a current topic that was important to them, find the appropriate official's address and then write their letter. My son was thrilled when he was able to write a letter of concern about nearby wetlands to one of our state senators and the senator wrote back! The lesson we both learned was an invaluable one.

Our elected officials need to hear from the people they represent. Quite often they base their voting on what they hear from us, their constituents (the voter who voted them into office). They can't represent us if we don't tell them what we think. The scouts learned it is a very simple process when the writer keeps a few simple steps in mind. These steps apply to any writer. These steps are:

- Be sure to tell the elected official you are (or are not) a constituent (you voted for them and they represent you).
- Be sure to address the official properly. Governors are addressed as "The Honorable" except in New Hampshire, Massachusetts and South Carolina, where governors are addressed as "His/Her Excellency." Members of the U.S. Congress and Senate are addressed as "The Honorable". State legislators are addressed as "The Honorable" or "Senator," Representative," "Assemblyperson". Also, "Mister," "Miss" or "Madam" are also acceptable forms of address. Check your state government's website. It will usually have the correct form of address for all state officers.

- Be brief and try to keep your letter to one page. Keep your content to, “The facts, just the facts.”
- Be polite. Be respectful.
- Never use vulgarity, profanity, or threats. The first two are just plain rude and the third one can get you a visit from the Secret Service. Simply stated, don't let your passion get in the way of making your point.
- Use your own words. Simply explain your point of view to the best of your ability.
- Write about what means the most to you, personally. Personal stories and observations mean the most.
- Be specific about what you would like the official to do about the subject you are writing about. Use your “polite” words. “Please consider voting no on Bill #123.” Or, “Please consider addressing this with others on your committee. Thank you for your assistance.”
- Address one thing at a time. If you need to, write two letters.
- Be sure your letter can be easily read. It doesn't have to be typed but if your handwriting is as bad as mine, you may want to type it or send it via e-mail.
- Be sure to include YOUR name address, phone number, email address, etc. on the letter. Envelopes and letters often get separated. Consider writing an email as letters are subject to security searches and can take longer to leave the mail room and get to your elected official's desk.
- Never demand a response. Most offices will send a reply of some sort but a demand will be ignored.
- Once your letter has been written put it aside and sleep on it. Read it again the next day. Make sure it is polite. Be sure to check for spelling errors and writing problems. Have someone else read it, and help edit if need be, before you send it.
- Once the letter is written and ready to go make sure your address for the official is correct and then send it.

Still need some help? The following is the outline recommended and provided by LaCAN.

Outline of a Sample Letter to Policy Makers

Your return address
 Telephone Number
 Date
 The Honorable _____
 Office (for example, Governor of Louisiana, House of Representatives, Senate)
 Address (use legislators home address when the legislature is not in session)

Dear
 Governor/Senator/Representative_____:

First Paragraph: Explain who you are, such as “I am writing to you as the parent of Jennifer, who is five years old and has severe developmental disabilities.” Include information about your child and your family that will help the policy maker understand your needs. If you can, send a photograph of your child or your family.

Second Paragraph: Describe how the Community and Family Support System will help you, for example: “My family would benefit from individual and family support services that would help us keep Jennifer at home (or whatever services you may need).”

Third Paragraph: Tell the policy maker what he/she can do to help, such as “I urge you to support expanded funding for New Opportunities Waiver (NOW) services.”

Fourth Paragraph: Let the policy-maker know that you would be interested in hearing about his/her view concerning Community and Family Support. Thank him/her for their consideration of your concerns.

“Sincerely,
 John Q. Citizen”

A properly, politely written letter, kept short and to the point, is one of the best tools we have for making our voices heard. Go ahead, it isn't that hard.