

Understanding and Influencing the Legislative Process in New Mexico

Ellen Pinnes and Jim Jackson

Tips for Communicating with Legislators

- ❖ Be pleasant and non-confrontational. Thank the legislator for taking the time to talk with you and for the work he or she does as a legislator.
 - Legislators work long hours and don't get paid. Like everyone else, they like to feel appreciated for what they do.
 - Your legislator will be more receptive to what you're saying if he or she feels appreciated rather than attacked.
- ❖ Tell the legislator your name when you speak with him or her. Also give the legislator your name, address, phone number and e-mail address in writing.
- ❖ Be clear and specific about the issues you want to talk with the legislator about.
 - Tell your story. Be brief and to the point. If the legislator asks for more information, you can go into more detail.
 - If possible, put your main points in writing. Your legislator can concentrate better on you and what you are saying – and remember it – if you supply the basic notes in a handout.
 - Be clear about what the problem is that you want the legislator to address.
 - Make specific recommendations about what you want the legislator to do to address the problem.
 - If possible, provide specific numbers or other documentation that supports your position. This might include names, facts and numbers, as well as studies or papers that document the relevant facts and issues. But be realistic about how much you can expect busy legislators to read, especially during the legislative session when they have many demands on their time. Try to distill the important information into a one-page or two-page document. You can offer more detailed information if the legislator wants it.
 - If the legislator asks for information that you don't have with you at the time, offer to send it later – and make sure to follow up.
- ❖ Show how this issue relates to the legislator's district. Legislators are elected to represent their constituents in the Legislature in Santa Fe so they'll want to know that this is an issue for the people they represent.
- ❖ If you're having an impromptu chat with the legislator rather than a meeting that's been scheduled in advance, be particularly sure to keep it short and to the point.

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Giving Testimony to a Legislative Committee During the Legislative Session

- ❖ Members of the audience can speak only when invited to do so by the chair of the committee.
- ❖ When a committee is considering a bill, there is usually an opportunity for members of the audience to speak in support of or opposition to the bill. Pay attention so you're speaking as part of the appropriate group: supporters or opponents.
- ❖ When there are many people who want to comment on a bill, the committee chairperson may limit audience comment to only a few people on each side of the issue. This means you may not have an opportunity to address the committee on the bill you're interested in. Do NOT fuss or complain about this.
- ❖ When you speak in support or opposition:
 - ◆ Give your name.
 - ◆ State briefly who you are and why you're interested in the issue. (For example, "My name is Jane Sanchez and I'm the parent of a child who is on the waiting list for Developmental Disability waiver services.")
 - ◆ Thank the committee for giving you the opportunity to speak.
 - ◆ Keep your comments SHORT and to the point – you may be allowed only a minute or two to speak. Tell the committee why this issue is important to you and how it affects you, your family, or your community.
- ❖ "Going through the chair" – The parliamentary procedure used by the New Mexico Legislature calls for all debate to be directed through the chairperson.
 - ◆ The proper way to address the committee is to first address the chair: "Mr. Chairman, members of the committee... ."
 - ◆ Even if you're invited to respond to a question from another legislator, the response technically goes through the chair, as in "Madam Chairman, Senator Jones... ."
 - ◆ The chairperson probably won't enforce this rule too strictly with members of the public, but you should be aware of it.