

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

1. **Plan:** Before you contact your legislator, **plan** your message. State your issue succinctly and keep your request simple and to the point.
2. **Support:** After stating your request, **support** your position with a key point or personal story.
3. **Thank:** If the legislator agrees to support your issue, **thank** him or her. Regardless of the legislator's position, thank him or her for taking the time to consider your request.
4. **Inform:** Let MSCF (Rick Nelson) know of any issues that may concern the union statewide.

Five ways to communicate with your legislator

1. **E-mail your legislator** – E-mail in many ways has replaced other forms of communication. This technological tool is fast, cheap, and efficient. Follow these guidelines for crafting an e-mail message to your legislator:
 - **If you are a constituent, say so in the subject line of the message.** For example – *Subject: Message from a constituent on xyz issue.* Most legislators have their staff sort and respond to their e-mail, and this strategy will increase the likelihood that your communication is read.
 - **Provide personal examples and local context.** Write your message as you would write a letter, but in a more concise format. Include personal examples.
2. **Write a letter** – A letter to your legislator allows you to give more information than you could provide in a phone call or e-mail. It can also be an effective strategy for following up on a phone call, visit, or e-mail. Follow these steps:
 - **If you are a constituent, begin by saying so.** If you voted for the legislator, let him/her know that as well. Make sure you write your return address on the envelope.
 - **Localize, localize, localize.** Make a strong connection between the issue and the community the legislator represents. Use local examples that illustrate why your issue is important and why your position is a strong one.
 - **Address your letter in the formal way.**

Write to DFL Senators at:

Senator *firstname lastname*

Capitol

75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

St. Paul, MN 55155-1606

Write to House members and Senate Republicans at:

Representative or Senator *firstname lastname*

State Office Building

100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

St. Paul MN 55155-1206

Use a formal salutation: Dear Senator:
Dear Representative:

3. **Call your legislator** – A phone call is quick and easy and can be done at a moment's notice. You don't need to be an expert on the issue in order to be persuasive; you just need to give your personal perspective. But it is still critical that the phone call be effective. Follow these guidelines:
 - **Try to call when the legislator is in your home district.** He or she will have more time and less distraction, and your position as a constituent will be enhanced if you are talking on "home turf."
 - **If you call your legislator in St. Paul,** chances are you won't get through. Leave a brief message with a secretary.
 - **Be prepared if you can't reach your legislator.** The legislator may not be available if you are calling his or her office during the legislative session. Be prepared to talk to one of the legislator's staff or to leave a message instead.
 - **If you are a constituent, begin by stating that.** Legislators are most responsive to the people who can keep them in office – their constituents. If you voted for the legislator, mention that.
 - **Be persuasive.** Following your plan, state the reason for the call. Try to persuade the legislator and get a commitment.
4. **Meet with your legislator** – A face-to-face meeting with your legislator can be a powerful opportunity to advance your agenda and establish a relationship.
 - **Plan your meeting.** Decide whether to go alone or with a group of constituents. If you go as a group, decide who will lead the meeting and what each person will contribute to the discussion.
 - **Know your audience.** Do some research about your legislator if you don't know much about him or her. Find out his/her positions on the issues you're discussing.
 - **If there are multiple issues important to you, select one that you will discuss.** Attempting to tackle multiple issues, especially if they are unrelated, dilutes your impact.
 - **Define your message.** Rather than trying to say everything you know or think about that issue, plan two or three observations or arguments that get to the heart of your position.
 - **Make an appointment.** But don't be surprised if it changes. Legislators often have last-minute hearings or committee meetings. Be flexible.
 - **Be polite and don't argue.** You won't change a legislator's mind by being nasty to him/her and legislators seldom change their minds as a result of an argument.

- **Meet in your home district.** Meetings in the home district are often less hurried than meetings at the Capitol, and they provide the “home turf” advantage.
 - **To start the conversation, find something personal that you have in common with the legislator.** Engage in a little “small talk” to break the ice – but keep it brief.
 - **State your visit.** Be clear about why you are there, why he/she should be interested (remember to mention again that you’re a constituent, and use local examples), and what you want the legislator to do.
 - **State your case.** Keep it concise, focused, and personalized.
 - **Don’t feel you have to be an expert** on all issues in order to offer your opinion. Legislators don’t expect you to be an expert. They rely on staff for technical expertise.
 - **Invite comments and questions.** Engage your legislator in dialogue. Don’t worry if he/she asks you something you don’t know the answer to – simply say you don’t know, but you’ll find out for him/her.
 - **Speak from your expertise as a classroom teacher** who is concerned about students. Most legislators have a great deal of respect for classroom teachers and the work they do. They are genuinely interested in how their decisions affect the classroom.
 - **State only what you know.** Don’t fudge the facts or guess.
 - **Leave something behind.** Provide your legislator with brief, written information for him/her to think about it. Let the legislator know you’ll keep in touch.
 - **Follow up.** Write a handwritten thank-you to your legislator to show you appreciate his/her time.
- 5. Write a letter to the editor** – Local newspapers are an underused resource in grassroots advocacy. Letters to the editor can be powerful vehicles for influencing or inspiring public debate, making the case for your issue or responding to related events. Elected officials always read the opinion pages of their local paper to find out what their constituents think. Use these tips to make it more likely your letter will get printed:
- **Capitalize on the hot stories.** Find ways to tie stories in the news to your issue. Open your letter with a reference to the recent event, and then quickly build a logical bridge to your issue.
 - **Keep it brief.** Most letters to the editor should be under 250 words.
 - **Use word cues to underscore your point.** For instance, preface your major conclusion with “The important thing is...” If you have research that supports your case, preface the facts with “Research proves that...”
 - **Don’t overlook neighborhood weeklies and smaller papers.** Often these publications have more room for letters, and community papers have very large

readerships.

- **Include a call to action or a solution.** If you are illustrating a need or making a case for a specific action, include a line about what people can do to help.
- **Don't be afraid to toot your own horn.** If you or your organization is involved in work that addresses the issue, include that in your letter.
- **Be passionate, but not poisonous.** There is a difference between “fire in the belly” and righteous indignation. Avoid sarcasm, and if you're angry, cool off a bit before sending a final version.
- **Use local or personal angles.** Include local and personal perspectives in the letter to illustrate why readers should care about the issue.
- **Try meeting with editorial boards.** The editorial boards on newspapers often meet with community members, and sometimes will write an editorial based on information they receive from these meetings. Ask for a meeting with your local paper's editorial board, make a case for your issue, and ask them to support it with an editorial.