

Public Policy Advocacy

*Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.
– Proverbs 31:8-9*

What is public policy advocacy?

Public policy is the way we govern our communities through laws and administrative rules. *Public Policy Advocacy* is a way of loving our neighbors as ourselves by helping shape public policy in ways that will affect their lives for the better.

What is an advocate?

An *Advocate* is anyone who cares enough about the good of his or her community and its members to speak up on their behalf. An advocate does not have to be an “expert” or a “political activist,” only someone who takes seriously the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. An advocate learns about issues affecting the community and expresses his or her views and concerns to the appropriate policy makers, building relationships with them through regular contact.

Why should I be an advocate?

Being an advocate means being:

- A **good steward** of the gift of citizenship in a democracy;
- A **faithful witness** to God’s will for a just, peaceful, and healthy world;
- A **loving neighbor** to those whose lives are impacted by public policies – especially the most vulnerable among us.

How can I be an advocate?

Most public policy advocacy involves telling elected officials about your support for, or opposition to, a specific piece of legislation. This can be done by letter or e-mail, or at an office visit or a public hearing.

Find out who your legislators are and how to contact them:

To find the name and contact information for your representatives in the Wisconsin Legislature or the U.S. Congress, go to the “Legislative Alert Center” under “Advocacy” on the Wisconsin Council of Churches home page www.wichurches.org, or call the legislative hotline, 1-800-362-9472. For more information about state legislators, go to <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/>; for members of Congress, go to <https://www.congress.gov/members>. NOTE: Most legislators have little interest in the views of non-constituents.

Write a letter to your state or federal legislator:

- 1) *Be Personal* – a handwritten letter receives much more attention than a form letter, card, or e-mail
- 2) *Be Concise* – Limit your letter to one or two paragraphs. Just a few sentences is fine.
- 3) *Be Specific* – State clearly what action you want your legislator to take, such as to support or oppose a particular bill. Limit your request to a single topic or piece of legislation.
- 4) *Be Polite* – Be respectful, even when you strongly disagree.
- 5) *Give a Reason* – Say what motivates you to write, and/or support your position with a fact.
- 6) *Identify Yourself* – Include your name and address on both the envelope and in your letter, so it's clear you are a constituent.
- 7) *Follow up* – Write again if you haven't heard back in several weeks. (Keep in mind that letters may be delayed by security measures.) If you've gotten a response, thank your legislator and ask any further questions you may have. After the vote, write to express your thanks or disappointment for the way your legislator voted.

Send an e-mail to your legislator:

- 1) Check your legislator's website. It will often include a form you can fill out to send an e-mail.
- 2) Follow the same guidelines as for letters – be personal, concise, specific, and polite; give a reason for your position; include your name and mailing address, and follow up.

Visit with your legislator or a staff member:

While you may want to try for a personal visit with your legislator, a visit with the appropriate member of your legislator's staff is usually easier to arrange -- and the staff member may be better informed on your issue. You can plan to meet with your legislator or their staff at their office in the U.S. or State Capitol, or in their office in their home district (local office staff usually do not handle legislative matters).

- 1) *Before the meeting*
 - Plan ahead – Be clear about what you want to achieve. Familiarize yourself with the issue you want to discuss and the legislator's views on it.
 - Make an appointment – Tell the staff person making the appointment the purpose of the meeting, the bills you want to discuss (no more than two or three issues), and the constituents that will be attending. Keep in mind that most legislators have little interest in the views of non-constituents.
- 2) *During the meeting*
 - Be prompt, patient, and flexible – With legislators' busy schedules, delays and interruptions are common.
 - Be prepared – Bring information and materials supporting your position, including a concise fact sheet that you can leave behind.
 - Don't forget the "Ask" – Make a specific request to the legislator: to sponsor a bill, to support or oppose a bill or an amendment to it, talk to other legislators, etc. Carefully note the legislator's or staff person's response.
- 3) *After the meeting*
 - Keep in mind that this meeting, like every other contact, is a step in developing a long-term relationship with your legislator and the legislator's staff.

- Make a note for yourself about how the meeting went, what was covered, and how the legislator or staff person responded to you. This will help you or others to prepare for future contacts.
- Send a thank-you letter reviewing the points discussed during the meeting, and providing any additional information requested.

Offer Testimony at a Public Hearing:

The Wisconsin Legislature holds public hearings at which citizens, as individuals or on behalf of an organization, may respond to pending legislation. You can register to testify for or against the bill or to provide information without taking a position. You can also register for or against the bill without testifying. If you want to testify:

1. Before the Hearing

- Be prepared – Know your issue and position well enough that you can answer questions from the legislators who are on the committee that is holding the hearing. Identify your key points and anticipate counterarguments from the other side.
- Do your homework on the committee members – who they represent, their personal and political background, their attitude toward the issue, etc. This may help you connect with them when answering their questions.

2. During the Hearing

- Bring about 25 copies of your testimony. Give copies to the committee staff to distribute to all members of the committee (whether present or not). Also give copies to any reporters that may be covering the hearing.
- Be concise and specific. You may or may not be given a time limit, but any case, limit yourself to 5 to 10 minutes. Try to use vivid examples, stories, or exhibits; avoid overloading your testimony with information that may not be remembered.
- Be polite, but don't let yourself be intimidated or diverted from your message. Thank the committee for the opportunity to express your views.

Addressing Correspondence:

US Senator: The Honorable (full name)
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

US Representative: The Honorable (full name)
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

State Senator: Senator (full name)
Room _____, State Capitol
P.O. Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707

State Representative: Representative (full name)
Room _____, State Capitol
P.O. Box 8952* or 8953*
Madison, WI 5370

*If your Representative's last name begins with A-L, use P.O. Box 8952; if M-Z, use 8953.

For the names and room numbers for your WI legislators, go to www.legis.state.wi.us/waml, enter your address in the search box at upper right, and follow the link to the legislator's web page; or call the legislative hotline, 1-800-362-9472.

Useful Resources for Advocacy

For information on the Governor, the Wisconsin Legislature, proposed legislation, state agencies, and local and federal government, go to: <http://www.wisconsin.gov/state/core/government.html>

For information on lobbying regulations and activity at the state level, visit the website of the Wisconsin Ethics Board, <http://ethics.state.wi.us/>

How a Bill Becomes Law gives a basic overview of the legislative process in Wisconsin. <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/assembly/acc/media/1097/habbl.pdf>

A Citizen's Guide to Participation in the Wisconsin State Legislature from the Wisconsin Legislative Council includes: an Introduction to the Legislature; How to Find Legislative Documents and Follow the Legislative Process; How to Contact Your Legislator; How to Testify at a Public Hearing, and a Glossary of Common Legislative Terms. <http://lc.legis.wisconsin.gov/publications/citizensguide>

The Legislative Process in Wisconsin, from the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau, describes the organization of the Legislature and the process by which laws are introduced and acted upon. <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/lrb/media/1093/14rb2.pdf>

The *Wisconsin Blue Book* is published every two years, and provides extensive information about Wisconsin government and elected officials. It is available from your state legislators' offices or at your local public library. It is also available on the web at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/> under "Citizen's Information."

Information on federal legislation can be found at THOMAS on the Library of Congress website: <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

Information on lobbying, elections, and voting is available from the Government Accountability Board, <http://www.gab.wi.gov/>

Sources: Bread for the World, Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations, Lutheran Partners in Advocacy