



COMMUNICATING WITH POLICY MAKERS AND OPINION LEADERS

Elected and appointed officials listen to their constituents. As a citizen and recovery advocate, you can help policymakers understand the issues and let them know why it's important for them to support addiction recovery. You can inform them about the steps that they can take to support public policies to help all people have better access to recovery, reduce the discrimination and stigma which keeps many people from seeking recovery, and helps them move on to better lives once they achieve it.

Understanding the process and politics of getting things done – whether at City Hall, the State House or the US Capitol – is key to influencing policymakers. The process is a little more interesting than what was described in our high school civics classes. Sometimes policy decisions take years to develop, other times it's just a matter of weeks or months. Policymakers, opinion leaders and decision makers respond when they understand that an issue has deep support. That's where advocates come in. There are many opportunities to weigh in with the voices of every day people.

Building relationships is key – with policymakers and their staffs. You can nurture and develop relationships by communicating with them regularly. As time goes on, they will look to you for your expertise in addiction recovery as well as your link to others in your community. Here are a few tools for being part of making change that will support addiction recovery.

Local, state and federal agencies make many decisions that affect addiction recovery, whether they are making zoning decisions, issuing regulations about what types of services will be available and to whom, and a host of other decisions. As you work with others you will learn more about who these policymakers are, the types of information they need, and when they need it from you.

-- MEETINGS --

A face-to-face meeting with your local, state or federal elected officials is the most effective way to deliver your message. In Washington, you'll most likely talk with the legislative aide, who serves as the boss's eyes and ears on issues. Federal and state elected officials usually have offices in their home states and aides who you can meet there.

Frequently it's easier to set up a meeting with a U.S. Senator or Representative when he or she is at home than in Washington. Meetings allow you to flex your political muscle as a constituent and remind your legislator that you are paying close attention to his or her actions.

You can also meet with your elected official on your ground. One of the most effective ways to educate them about the recovery advocacy work that you are doing is to invite them to come to a ground breaking, ribbon cutting ceremony, or meeting that you have organized.

Meeting with a legislator presents particular advocacy challenges. Generally, elected officials are charismatic and charming people, eager to hear the views of their constituents. However, their goals in a meeting may differ from yours. You will want him or her to act, or make a commitment to support your aims. On the other hand, the legislator may be inclined to avoid controversy and balk at making a clear commitment to you. Expect ambiguity, but don't give up.

Make an appointment. Call your lawmaker and ask to speak with the Appointments Secretary. Introduce yourself and briefly explain that you want to talk about addiction recovery. Be sure to mention that you are a constituent. This will increase your chances of getting an appointment with the legislator as well as with his or her staff.

[If you would like to invite your legislator to an event, let the Appointments Secretary, sometimes called the scheduler, know what the event is, when and where it will be held, and who is expected to attend. If you expect media coverage of the event, be sure to let the Appointments Secretary know.]

Decide who's going to attend. One person should serve as a spokesperson, but all should be introduced and be prepared to explain why they support addiction recovery. Use introductions strategically to create a personal rapport and build a relationship.

Prepare. If you are meeting with your elected official and not an aide, the meeting will probably be brief. That's why it's essential that you prepare yourself in advance so that you are able to make the most of your time. Write down two or three points that you want to make. Be as specific as you can about what you want the lawmaker to do. Repeat your message in as many different ways as possible. Keep your message as focused as possible.

Stick to bigger, understandable issues: Helping people achieve long-term recovery from addiction will save society money in the long term when the costs of health care, incarceration, crime, and the effects on family members of the failure to make recovery a reality for so many people. Talk in simple, real terms that concretely describe your position and how addiction recovery affects your community. Research your legislator's stance in advance so that you will know the best way to present your story and your position.

Think about how you will tell your story in advance. Practice using the parts of your story, whether you are in recovery or a family member or friend of someone in recovery that will make the case in a simple, understandable way. Share your experience.

Be persuasive. Use what you know about your legislator's views to appeal to her or him. Cite statistics, studies, polls and articles to support your views. If you don't know an answer, say you

don't know it and promise to get back with an answer. Be professional, polite, personal and convincing. Dress neatly in business attire or clean, neat clothing. Arrive five minutes before your meeting time, but prepare to wait. Legislators and their aides are commonly late, and sometimes may be interrupted.

Ask for a commitment. Politely ask the person that you are meeting with to commit to do what you are asking. If he or she won't, try to find out why. Offer to provide more information if that seems appropriate. This is your opportunity to learn more specifically what the person's position is, information that you can use to think about how best to take the next steps in educating him or her about addiction recovery.

Leave materials behind. Bring a few background and other educational materials to leave with your elected official. Newspaper articles, T-shirts from events, and brief background information are reminders of your visit.

Follow-up. After your meeting, write a thank-you letter to the legislator and any staff members who facilitated or attended the meeting. Enclose materials about the issue and answer questions that were raised. Keep in touch and build a working relationship with the office.

-- PHONE CALLS --

- Policymakers rely on phone calls to gauge where the community is on an issue. Phone calls are a fast, effective way to speak up!
- Ask for the name and title of the staff person who works on addiction issues, usually the health staffer. Ask to speak to this person. Jot down the name and correct spelling.
- State your name and organization.
- Identify the issue you wish to address.
- Briefly and clearly state your position. Ask where the policymaker stands on the issue and ask that your message be passed on to the policymaker.
- Thank him or her and follow up with additional information to build a relationship with this individual. Don't be shy about calling regularly if there are new developments that you want to pass on. Policymakers need to hear your views.

-- E-MAILS --

E-mail is another fast, efficient way to get your views across. Aides keep track of the number of e-mails, phone calls and letters on an issue.

- Think of your e-mail as a letter, using the same guidelines that you would use in sending a letter.
- Be brief.
- State your name and your organization.
- Identify the issue you wish to address.
- Briefly and clearly state your position.
- Ask where the policymaker stands on the issue and ask that your message be passed on to the policymaker.

- Ask for a response.
- Don't forget to spell check!