

Communicating With Public Officials

The Perspective of an Elected Official

Judy Meredith, veteran human services lobbyist and Executive Director of the Public Policy Institute, identifies two main rules for influencing policy makers.

Rule 1: Elected and appointed officials as well as community leaders make different decisions when they are being watched by the residents who live in their districts. In order for elected officials to achieve their goals, they must be able to stay in office and need to be viewed favorably by the voters in their district to do so. In the state legislature, they must also take into account the positions that officials in leadership (Speaker of the House, Senate President) take on issues that are important to them, as they appoint members to committees and can make or break political careers. As a result, state legislators are continually balancing their own interests with voter opinion and the opinions of those in leadership.

Rule 2: In order to influence policy you have to get the right information (a compelling problem and an effective solution) to the right person (individual that has the power to get you what you want) at the right time (before a formal decision needs to be made). Programs must clearly communicate the needs they are working to meet, as well as evidence that their program is an effective solution to that problem. They must also have a basic understanding of the budget process, and key people, to ensure the information is delivered effectively.

Communicating Your Message to Public Officials

Keeping in mind the above rule on timing, mentoring program staff can:

- Make calls, send emails or hard copy letters to their legislators requesting their support;
- Mobilize their own constituents, such as mentors, youth and their families, to advocate on behalf of the program, by communicating the request to their own legislators;
- Set up face-to-face meetings with their legislators, the most effective way to communicate with officials, either at the program site, in the district office or at the State House. These meetings typically run 15-30 minutes, with a focus on making the case for why a budget item, or piece of legislation is important and then asking the official for his or her support.
- Engage the media by sending letters to the editor and press releases to local paper.
- Attend lobby days, testify at hearings, or provide written testimony for hearings where relevant bills or specific budget items are being discussed.