



Engaging with Legislators Toolkit: Tips and Best Practices

- ▶ **To make informed decisions about bills and policies during the legislative session, legislators must hear from constituents like you.**

1 | Build relationships with legislators early:

If you don't know your legislator well, reach out as soon as possible to start building a relationship. Legislators get thousands of contacts throughout the session. Knowing your name will help ensure they pay attention to your message and potentially contact you.

2 | Giving testimony:

A significant point of influence in the legislative process is during committee hearings and anyone may testify during a public committee hearing. Such hearings allow constituents to address concerns about proposed legislation before the committee passes, defeats, or amends a bill and, importantly, before the bill makes its way to the full House and Senate for debate and final vote.

Montanans may testify in person, virtually, or submit written testimony. It's important to note that all testimonies become part of the permanent public record.

In-person testimony:

- Hearing dates can pop up quickly, and meeting rooms can change at the last minute, so check frequently for details at leg.mt.gov.
- It's recommended to arrive early for hearings; however, you may enter or leave at any time even if the door is closed and the hearing is already in progress.
- Remember to turn off your cell phone.
- Be sure to sign in. Every hearing includes a table with a sign-in sheet. Speakers identify themselves as proponents (those for the bill), opponents (those against), or informational witnesses (generally used by other government personnel).
- Write out your testimony and practice. It should be no more than two minutes long.
- Bring a written copy of your testimony with your contact information. You may only have time to give your name during busy hearings. Written testimony will ensure it gets into the public record.
- Use proper legislative hearing protocol. At the beginning of testimony, open with "Chair, my name is _____, spelled _____, I am from _____ and represent (myself or an organization). I am speaking to (support or oppose) (Senate or House) bill number _____."
- Keep in mind there is a set order for testimony. Those in support go first, after which the committee chair allows opponents to speak.
- Be prepared to answer questions from legislators. Although you cannot ask questions during hearings, legislators sometimes call testifiers to the podium to answer questions about testimony. When answering questions, first address the chairperson of the committee. Then, address the legislator asking the question. For example, a response might sound like, "Chair, Representative Smith, thank you for the question. I am in support of _____ because..."

Testifying remotely:

- The main link for providing virtual testimony is leg.mt.gov/public-testimony.
- Any written testimony must be submitted by 5:00 p.m. the day before the hearing. Submit your written testimony, write a brief message, or request a Zoom link to testify in the bill hearing.
- Likewise, any request to testify remotely must be submitted by 5:00 p.m. the day before the hearing.
- Rules of decorum must be followed, and the Presiding Officer will call on you when it is your turn to speak. Follow the Zoom directions and raise your hand to let the Remote Committee Coordinator know when you want to speak. Legislative services will not automatically assume that you want to testify because you requested the Zoom link. There may be limits placed on how many people can testify remotely on each bill.

3 | Contacting your Legislator:

You may send a message through the legislative web portal to your legislator at leg.mt.gov/web-messaging or by calling the main switchboard and leaving a message at (406) 444-4800. Both methods will result in an email to the legislator's account or a physical note on their desk.

You may also email or call them directly. Their information is found at leg.mt.gov/legislator-information. Remember that if you call their direct line, they probably will not answer. Sessions are jam-packed, and Legislators are often in hearings or on the House/Senate floor.

When writing a message, keep in mind the following tips:

- Be concise. Keep your letter or email short and to the point. Use bullets and bold typeface to emphasize the main points.
- Be specific about how the bill helps or hurts your community. Personalized letters or emails are always more effective than form letters or petitions.
- Include the bill name and number and be clear about if you want the Legislator to support or oppose.
- Include your name, address, a little about yourself, and your role in your community.
- Thank a legislator if they followed your request in voting for or against a bill.

4 | Meeting in-person when in Helena:

- Make an appointment in advance when possible. Write, email, or call the legislator to request a meeting. Do not get discouraged if you do not get an immediate response.
- Limit your agenda to two or three items, understanding that the meeting may be only a few minutes.
- Bring relevant articles in the local newspaper, statistics about your community, and fact sheets about the legislation.
- Provide personal examples during your conversation whenever possible.
- Be honest.
- Be prepared to answer questions; if you do not know the answer, say you will find out and report back to the legislator.
- Follow up with a thank-you letter or message. Enclose any information promised, or that provides additional support for your position.

5 | Social Media

Social media can be an effective way to reach out to your legislator and encourage others to get engaged. Here are some ways to use the most popular social media channels:

- Follow the Montana League of Cities and Towns social media pages. Like, retweet, or comment on their posts - [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#).
- Like and follow legislators' pages, including representatives, committee members, and others. Comment or ask questions when they post. Share news articles about issues that matter to you. Please encourage your friends or followers to contact their legislators.
- Like, share, and comment on articles or posts from organizations engaged in your issues.
- On Twitter, use hashtags. People active in the political process often use #MTPOL (Montana politics) or #MTLEG (Montana Legislature) at the end of their tweets. Reporters often use these and may use your quote in a story or reach out to you for more information.
- Use polite, straightforward language.

**THE LEAGUE
IS HERE
TO ASSIST
YOU IN:**

- **Identifying key legislative decision-makers or leaders on policy.**
- **Clarifying where bills are in the process.**
- **Identifying opportunities for committee testimony.**
- **Sharing facts, figures, history, and compelling talking points related to bills and policy.**