

Tips for Contacting Your Legislator

Don't underestimate your influence: Legislators pay attention to the issues raised by voters in their communities, especially during an election year. The hometown connection is essential to getting a legislator's attention. Be sure you are registered to vote.

Know your legislators: Before contacting your legislator, do a little homework. The North Carolina General Assembly website, www.ncleg.net, is user-friendly and comprehensive. Look up your legislator's name, background, voting record and committee assignments. You can also check the status of bills, send an email to legislators and follow the legislative calendar.

Don't forget the legislator's staff: Get to know the staff in your legislator's office. They often have more time to devote to your concerns and have considerable influence with the legislator.

Know your local officials: Legislators respond to the needs and desires of local officials. Ask local officials for their help in your advocacy efforts with your legislators.

Identify yourself as a constituent: Being a constituent is important, so always identify where you live and how you are connected to the community. Include your name, address, phone number and email address in all correspondence.

Remember human nature: Like everyone else, legislators respond better to courtesy and appreciation. Legislators get many more complaints than compliments. Threats and ultimatums do little to convince a legislator to support your position. Be polite, positive and non-partisan.

Write a letter: Here are some suggestions:

- **Don't assume you need to be an expert in legislative advocacy:** You are the expert in knowing your situation (person with a disability, or family member/advocate for people with disabilities) and what supports you and your family need. Make contact with your legislator as a concerned advocate and voter about an issue important to you. You set the stage with your legislator for Autism NCARF representatives to follow up on the issue(s) you raise.
- **Say "thank you" before you say "please":** Open your letter by thanking legislators for their past support. If they are new to the job, thank them for their commitment to public service. Let them know that you appreciate their efforts on your behalf. Even if you disagree with their positions, they are more likely to listen to you if you recognize them for their work to represent you.
- **Tell your story:** Your own story is your most persuasive message. When contacting your legislator, share your experience about what has and has not worked for you/your family/people you advocate for. Share your experience - struggles along with your suggestions for solutions. Ask for the action you want your legislator to take. Be positive and courteous. Again, always identify yourself as a constituent by including your

name, address, phone number and email address in your correspondence. Thank them for their support.

- **Use your own words:** The most effective letter is a personal one, not a form letter. If you are using a form letter as a guide, modify it to express your message in your own words.
- **Send an email:** Write the email as if it were a personal letter, using the tips above. Identify yourself as a constituent.

Invite your legislator to visit: When legislators feel connected to your issues, they will be more likely to offer their support. Invite your legislators and their staffs when you are holding a disability awareness event, program or celebration of any kind. Legislators appreciate opportunities to interact with their constituents, especially during an election year. Let them know when local press might cover the event. Send a thank you note to each legislator who attends.

Make a visit to the legislator's office at home or in Raleigh: When the legislature is not in session, a visit to the home office will be less hectic. Here are some suggestions for your visit:

- Call the office and identify yourself as a constituent.
- Go with a friend or a group to make the visit less stressful.
- Prepare for the visit by defining what you want to accomplish. Know your issue(s) and your suggestions for solutions. Prepare to be brief and to the point.
- Don't overload a visit with too many issues. Focus on one or two.
- Thank your legislator for past support. If they are new to the job, thank them for their commitment to public service.
- Explain why your issues are important and make some suggestions for solutions.
- Be specific about what you are asking your legislator to do.
- Ask for their advice on what else you can do to make your advocacy efforts effective.
- Close on a positive note. Thank them for their time. Restate the issue and your suggestions. Be specific about what you want them to do.
- Regardless of the outcome, always send a thank you letter.

Attend candidate forums, especially during an election year: Listen for your legislators' responses to questions and how you can connect your issues with theirs. Ask questions from the audience -- be respectful, appreciative, share your experience and your recommendations. Talk with your legislator after the forum and personalize your contact.

Remember you are not alone: Expand your reach by asking family and friends to contact their legislators. Share the user-friendly [General Assembly website](http://www.ncleg.net) (www.ncleg.net) so they can identify the legislators from their home districts.

Stay informed: Once the legislative session starts, things happen quickly. Often there is little notice before an issue comes up for a vote. There will be times when a legislator needs immediate feedback from you on an issue. Read NCARF notices and please contact your legislators with feedback and input when asked to do so.