

VIC Advocacy Toolkit

Learn. Pray. Act.



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Legislative Advocacy Tips

Visits to Public Officials:

- Make an appointment. Be on time.
- Go with a friend or group.
- Focus on 1 or 2 issues.
- Begin with a warm introduction.
- Be brief and concise.
- Leave written materials, if available.
- Close on a positive note.

Telephone Calls to Public Officials:

- Give your name and address.
- Mention your group membership, if appropriate.
- Be brief.
- Focus on 1 issue.
- Indicate your position.
- Use the bill number, if available.
- Ask for your message to be repeated.
- Thank the secretary or aide.

Personal Letters to Public Officials:

- Focus on 1 issue.
- Use the bill number, if any.
- Be personal. Do not use a form letter.
- Be positive and constructive.
- Describe why you are concerned.
- Ask questions that require a response, e.g. how will he/she vote.
- Enclose information, if available.
- Write a thank you if a legislator votes with you or a polite letter of regret if he/she does not.

Before the Legislative Session:

- Sponsor educational sessions for groups.

- Pass out fact sheets on issues to individuals.
- Connect service projects of volunteers with the underlying social causes and issues.
- Identify your priorities for effectiveness.
- Visit legislators in your home district.
- Organize a telephone tree.

During the Legislative Session:

- Organize a letter writing campaign on an issue.
- Act on legislative alerts from networks.
- Identify subcommittees for your priorities.
- Write or visit your legislators and subcommittee members.
- When it goes to the full committee, contact your legislator and committee members.
- Attend committee hearings. Speak or simply be visibly present and supportive of a position.
- When legislation comes to the floor for a vote, contact your legislator.
- Activate a telephone tree alert. The fast pace often makes telephone calls necessary.

After the Legislative Session:

- Review what happened during the session.
- Share the results with individuals or groups.
- Write letters of gratitude to public officials.

Write a Letter or Email to Your Legislator

So you want to write a letter or email to your legislator to ask him or her to act swiftly on your issue? Your passion about the need for reform will be most effective if you follow these tips!

1. The correct way to address your representative is:

The Honorable Jane Doe
Virginia State Senate
Richmond, VA 12345

Dear Senator Doe:

[Your purpose for writing to your elected official should be stated in the first paragraph. Be clear and concise and include your “ask,” whether it be general support or the call for a specific vote.]

2. Explaining the issue in a compelling way will assure that your letter gets read and likely passed onto the legislator by the legislative aid, who reads everything first. Here are some more suggestions for the body of your letter:

- Be courteous and to the point. Never place blame, point fingers, or bring up irrelevant issues or unrelated past votes.
- Be sure to build a strong argument for your position by providing facts.
- Adding state-specific or regional references creates a more powerful and unique message.
- Be sure to address only one issue in your letter and try to keep it to one page.
- Cover several of the talking points that make most sense to you. Don't try to counter argue everything, or your letter will become unwieldy.

3. A strong closing will restate the problem, offer a solution and make a clear request so that the reader knows exactly what you're asking.

4. Be sure to include all of your contact information in case the legislator would like to follow up with further concerns or questions. You can also refer them to websites or research where you have received your information.

5. Check with the office in a few weeks to make sure they received your letter and are processing your request. Timely follow up reinforces your credibility and lets them know that you truly are determined to witness dedicated to the issue and meaningful change.

Grassroots Tip: Host a letter writing party with other advocates. Share information and write to your officials and Letters to the Editor about your concerns.

Meet with Your Legislator



office and in Richmond.

Building a strong relationship with your elected officials is a key element to being an effective advocate. Meeting with them face to face is the best way to begin and strengthen that relationship. Keep in mind that Virginia legislators are incredibly busy during session, if that is the only time you meet with them they may not ever remember you. Be sure to meet with them throughout the year, in their home

Before you visit:

- Call and set up an appointment
- Don't be dismayed if your legislator is not available, meeting with a legislative aide can be just as valuable!
- Prepare materials and talking points. You should know exactly what it is you want to ask the legislator to do, and provide brief materials to leave behind.
- Confirm your appointment the day before if it was schedule very far in advance.

Grassroots Tip: Consider visiting your elected official with a few other constituents, but be sure to have a clear leader and don't take more than 5 people on a group visit.

While you're there:

- Identify yourself as a constituent and identify your profession or organization as appropriate.
- Be friendly, and begin on a positive note by finding common ground.
- Be specific about what you are asking them to do – introduce, vote for or against specific legislation, etc.
- Be concise.
- Be honest if you don't have answers to their questions, but be sure to follow up with appropriate information afterwards.

After you visit:

- Send a personal, hand written thank you note.
- Follow up with additional information if the official had unanswered questions.
- Track the issue you spoke with your legislator about, and hold them accountable for their vote or action.

For more information, check out our training video online at:

www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org/getinvolved

Writing Effective Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor of local and statewide newspapers are a good way to express your views on an issue while also providing important information to the public. The "Letters to the Editor" section is one of the most popular sections of newspapers, assuring letter writers a wide audience for their views.



Letters render a valuable service to the public by providing information and viewpoints that might not be reported in other sections of the newspaper. Many people have not had the same kinds of experiences you have had, or may have been misinformed about these issues. Your letter can help them gain new insights, and hopefully, encourage them to take some action.

In order to be effective, a letter must be well written and focused. The following are some tips on writing effective letters to editors. These tips are also helpful in writing letters to legislators or other public officials you may ask for support on these issues.

- Think about what you want to say before you begin to write: your ideas should be clear in your own mind before you begin to put them on paper.
- Be concise! Don't try to explain everything there is about an issue. Think of what is most important to you about this issue and focus your letter on it. And remember to emphasize what action you want the reader to take--contacting their legislator, writing to the governor, etc.
- Make your letter easy to read; short sentences, short paragraphs and simple words are best. Make sure to include your name, address and phone number because they will contact letter-writers to confirm that you were the one who sent the letter.
- Keep your letter positive. It is more important to emphasize your points and what people need to do to help instead of making things more confusing.
- Don't be rude or threatening. This will often hurt your cause.
- Target your letters, especially to areas that have had little coverage on the issue. Try to imagine who will be reading your letter (farmers, urban residents, unemployed people) and think of what their particular concerns are and what arguments might be persuasive with them.
- Don't be discouraged if your letter is not printed right away, or printed at all. The larger newspapers often have more letters than they can print, or may not print more than one or two letters on a certain topic. Even if only one out of ten letters is printed, you have reached thousands of readers--enough to make it worthwhile.
- Remember to send letters to smaller, local papers in addition to the papers with larger circulation.
- Consider submitting your letter by email so it will reach the newspaper in a more timely manner. Also, check the newspaper's website for instructions on letter submission.

Writing Effective Op-Ed's

Op-Eds lie opposite the editorial page in a newspaper, which is how they got their name. They are longer pieces than a letter to the editor or editorial, and they give you the chance to defend a persuasive and legitimizing position.

1. Read the paper. Closely monitor opinion pages to get a sense of article run by the editor, and pay close attention to any pieces on your issue or by your peers.
2. Get to know the process for submission. The normal process usually is to submit a typed article (average length of 500-800 words) with a cover letter to the Editorial Page Editor. Keep in mind the usual protocol for submitting to sets of papers (i.e., in California, the LA Times is the first priority to receive the piece. If they run it, others will also run it. On the other hand, if it is being run by other lesser known papers, they won't).
3. Writing the Op-Ed:
 1. Find an interesting angle from which to approach the underlying theme. This is usually the most difficult part of the effort. Editors are looking for topic immediacy, name recognition, or creative angles on a topic.
 2. Getting a coalition partner, VIP, or legislator to co-sign can definitely help get coverage.
 3. Here are a set of tips when writing an op-ed:
 1. You've got to woo the reader in the first couple of paragraphs, whether it's by beginning with an interesting anecdote or question, a provocative statement, or a colorful quote.
 2. Make ample use of anecdotes and quotes. They keep the reader going.
 3. Wherever possible, show rather than tell. It's more convincing.
 4. If you can do it naturally, tie the end of the article to the beginning.
 5. Scrupulously maintain the focus of your theme. Don't digress.
 6. Back up assertions with facts, and double check them. Make sure your quotations are accurate, both the actual words and context in which they are used.
 7. Don't overstate anything; overstatement creates distrust in the reader's mind.
 8. Anticipate questions a reader might have, and try to answer them.
 4. Follow up ruthlessly. Did they get it? Will they print it (and when)? Can you adjust it to their specifications, etc?

Grassroots Tip: *Op-Ed's are more likely to be printed if written by a community leader. Consider encouraging local leaders to vocalize their concerns!*

Do's and Don'ts of Religious Advocacy

DO...

- Take time to study the teachings of your particular faith group on public policy. The resources that others have developed will prove helpful. If you wish to speak on public issues from a faith perspective, it is helpful to draw on the essential teachings of your faith.
- Maintain an honest, non-partisan position on issues.
- Urge all members of your congregation to register to vote. Virginia is a low voter registration, low voter turnout state. Make certain that persons who cannot physically get to the polls secure an absentee ballot. Provide a number people who need transportation to the polls can call. Do not tell people how to vote, but encourage all people of faith to participate in the civic process.
- Attend candidate forums and town halls. You will be astonished at how appreciative candidates are of citizens who ask honest questions and share concerns in a sincere, non-threatening way. Listen carefully. Do candidates really answer questions or avoid making direct responses? Does the candidate have a record on the issue?
- Linger a bit after candidate forums for a chance to engage candidates in personal conversation. Make sure they get to know you by name and by face. They are people too and are eager to meet new people.

DON'T...

- Distribute partisan campaign literature as part of a congregational activity. Your congregation may need to decide what its policy will be regarding granting any political organization permission to distribute campaign literature peacefully on property belonging to your congregation. A congregation may issue a ban.
- Distribute a candidate survey on narrowly selected issues that could appear biased.
- Distribute literature that does not include the name of the organization that produced the material.
- Invite selected candidates to address a congregational group and exclude other candidates. Make certain that all candidates for the same office receive identical invitations.
- Conduct a partisan voter registration drive.
- Distribute information you know to be untrue, violates the beliefs of your faith community, suggests partisan positions, or insults the religious beliefs of others.