

HOW TO Develop Relationships with Lawmakers

by Jenny Parker and Beth Olson

The idea of developing a working relationship with your local representatives can be overwhelming, or at least a bit daunting. However, personal relationships with elected officials are the very backbone of a functional democracy.

The government buildings are the people's buildings. We are welcome at any time and we can all learn how to be effective once inside. Developing relationships with legislators is a mark of strong citizen leadership.

There are four aspects to keep in mind while building a relationship with your legislator. With these tips, you can give your activism a K.I.C.K!

1. KNOW your legislator.

- Background
- Voting Record
- Passions and interests
- Committees they serve on
- Who supports your elected official?

2. INFORM your legislator.

- Who you are
- What you are passionate about
- Share your skills and facts that you have about your issue

3. CONNECT with your legislator.

- Recognize them and say "hi" at social events
- Invite them to events you are hosting
- Try to include their families for social events

4. KEEP the relationship growing.

- Continue learning more about your legislator.
- Continually inform your legislator on what you are doing
- Stay connected to your legislator through meetings, social events, or even letters

*Adapted from the Illinois Association of Park Districts' website—
www.ilparks.org*

Not Sure Who Represents You?

Visit <http://www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us/> to find out who represents you and how to contact them in the district and at the Capitol.

Get to Know Your Legislators

To make a difference in the legislative process, you must develop a relationship with your legislators. Keep in mind that you can work effectively with someone, regardless of the personal opinions either of you may hold. Although you are unlikely to agree on every issue, you can still build a positive relationship in the long run.

The best way to get to know your legislators on a personal basis is to spend time with them when the Legislature is not meeting. Arrange a meeting during the months between sessions when they are home.

Your legislators are also your neighbors. You share many of the same interests and concerns, so make a strong effort to build on the common ground you both hold. Take the time to find out who they are as people.

Several types of communication can be effective in building a relationship with your lawmaker. Personal meetings, either to discuss a specific issue or just to introduce yourself as a constituent, are the most effective. As a constituent, you can develop and maintain an ongoing, working relationship with the local, state, and federal government officials representing your area. These relationships are best established at a time of no need.

Making Contact with your Legislator

Take advantage of every opportunity to meet and become better acquainted with your state representative and senator. Opportunities may develop through local civic or charitable organizations, local and state political functions, and political fundraisers. Relationships initiated through such meetings can evolve quickly into relationships that permit discussion of licensure issues and other concerns.

These relationships are best developed by contacts made when the legislator is home in his/her district. In these personal contacts, it is

important that you be positive and constructive in your remarks.

Here are some general tips that apply whether you are meeting directly with the legislator, speaking on the telephone, or writing a letter to your representative:

DO'S

- Prepare well and always stick to the facts.
- Be prepared to have sound reasons to reinforce your position.
- Offer to follow up with more if you do not know the answer to a question.
- When you are unable to achieve the desired result or response do not get angry - try and maintain a positive relationship with your legislator.
- Don't "preach" to the legislator - he/she may know more about an issue than you realize.
- Be persistent without harassing a legislator once the initial message has been delivered.
- Learn to "read" the legislator's response (legislators normally do not give a totally negative or positive response and will usually allow leeway to change their position).
- Always write and thank your legislator when he/she does something for you.
- When the Legislative Session is over, thank your legislator for doing a good job, even when your issues are not addressed. Let them know you will be contacting them in the summer to talk about next session's legislation.

Caution! Some general advice on what not to do:

DONT'S

- Don't beat around the bush, ramble, or go to unnecessary lengths
- Don't be argumentative or threatening -- threats destroy your credibility
- Don't remind legislators of broken

- promises — don't be vindictive
- Never stretch the truth to make your argument
- Don't take for granted that your legislator understands the subject matter
- Avoid using jargon and unexplained acronyms where possible
- Avoid stereotyped phrases and

- sentences that give the appearance of "form" letter
- Don't use postcards
- Don't become a constant "Pen Pal"
- Don't pretend to wield vast political influence
- Don't expect everything to go your way

One of the most effective ways to develop a strong relationship with your legislator is to get involved in their campaign. Getting to know a candidate before they are in office is crucial for a strong relationship. It demonstrates a mutual trust and respect. Actively supporting a candidate by donating time and/or money shows dedication!

- How to get involved -
 - **Donate money to the campaign:** A campaign doesn't function without donations. *Everything*, down to the light bulbs in the campaign office, comes solely from your campaign donations. Are you worried because you can't give thousands of dollars? Give what you can! \$10, \$20, or \$50 makes more of a difference than you might think!
 - **Blockwalk:** Go door-to-door in district neighborhoods to ask for support or register new voters. Blockwalking is probably the most effective way to reach voters. People appreciate the time and effort put forth to seek out their support. Donate a few hours one Saturday or Sunday and get a little exercise for a good cause!
 - **Phone bank:** Call identified voters and ask for support. This is the best way to reach a large number of voters person-to-person in a short period of time.
 - **Host a fundraiser:** The benefits of hosting a fundraiser for your candidate are two-fold. First, you are helping a candidate raise much-needed funds. Second, this gives your friends and other donors a chance to meet and talk with your candidate of choice. Fundraisers also are a great networking tool and show your dedication to the candidate.
 - **Host an open house/meet and greet:** Invite your friends and neighbors to come meet a candidate or legislator without the pressure of donating money to the campaign. This is a great way for voters to meet a candidate in an intimate setting and get to know them as a person as well as a politician.
 - **Office work:** Campaigns usually have small staffs that are working 12-15 hour days and need a little help around the office. Campaign office work can include anything from stuffing envelopes to data entry to recruiting volunteers. Call the campaign office, and they will almost certainly have a job for you around the headquarters!
 - **Put a sign in your yard:** This one's easy! Call the campaign headquarters and request a sign. You can either pick it up at the office yourself, or they'll send someone to put it in your yard. Want to go above and beyond? Find three or four friends and neighbors who also want yard signs! Campaigns love people who take initiative!
 - **Put a bumper sticker on your car:** Become a driving campaign ad! It's easy and fun to spot fellow supporters on the road!
 - **Remember:** You do not have to live in a certain district to volunteer on a campaign! Go anywhere!

Working on campaigns is not only important in building a relationship with the legislator, but also in building solid working relationships with his or her staff. Many times, the same people who work on a candidate's campaign become staffers in the legislator's capitol office as well.

Being a source of solutions and ideas for your legislator is a guaranteed way to build a relationship. ~State Representative Mark Strama

Developing relationships extends beyond just candidates and staffers. By volunteering for a candidate with whom you agree and respect, you will meet fellow volunteers with ideals similar to your own. This can be beneficial when working on common issues during a legislative session.

Bottom line: Meet and form good working relationships with candidates, staffers, and fellow advocates, as often as possible. Relationships are the key to political success!

“LET NO MAN IMAGINE THAT HE HAS NO INFLUENCE. WHOEVER HE MAY BE, AND WHEREVER HE MAY BE PLACED, THE MAN WHO THINKS BECOMES A LIGHT AND A POWER.”



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For more information about the topic of this handout or to find out more about the Get F.I.T. Know-How series, contact Texas Impact at 512.472.3903, or email us at justice@texasimpact.com

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people of faith working for justice

Texas Impact is a grassroots network for Texas religious communities. Our members include regional and statewide religious organizations, local congregations and alliances, and individuals.

Texas religious leaders established Texas Impact in 1973 in the wake of a major scandal that shook state government. Texas Impact’s founders wanted people of faith to involve themselves in government and influence state leaders to direct their attention to the needs of people rather than their own selfish interests. Those founders knew that acts of charity alone are not enough to break the cycles of poverty, injustice and hopelessness.