

## Tips for Contacting Your Legislators to Support or Oppose a Bill

Most legislators actually do pay attention to communications from the people who live in the districts they represent. Persistent advocacy sometimes can pay off for you, your family, and our community.

Every legislator is a little different, and I can't claim to know more about your relationship with your local state senator or assemblymember than you do. These are general tips that you can adapt to fit your own situation.

Most people don't know who their state senator or assemblymember is. (Hint: It's not Dianne Feinstein or Barbara Boxer.) If you don't know who your legislators are, they probably don't know who you are, either, and it's time for them to find out. To find out who they are, go to [www.ArcCalifornia.org](http://www.ArcCalifornia.org), scroll down to the red, white and blue "Write Your Legislators" button, enter your ZIP code, and click "Enter."

If you know someone who works for the legislator whose support you want, call him or her, regardless of whether he or she works in the legislator's Capitol office in Sacramento or district office near you. **Personal relationships are important.** If you don't know anyone there yet, call the Capitol office.

If you can't call, fax the legislator a letter in Sacramento. A letter on a letterhead – your organization or business, for example – is best. Don't send it in the US mail; it can take up to three weeks to get through the anthrax screen.

In general, don't use email unless you know for sure that the legislator pays just as much attention to email as to letters. Some do. Some don't.

However, if you know someone who works for the legislator, and if you can't call, you can email him or her personally. (Did I mention that personal relationships are important?)

When you get the legislator's Capitol office, tell whoever answers the phone that you're a constituent of the legislator and you're calling about Senate Bill so-and-so or Assembly Bill such-and-such. Tell them which committee the bill is in – you'll get that information from the Arc's Action Alert that asked you to call – and ask who staffs that committee for the legislator. If the bill already has passed committee and is before the full Senate or Assembly, ask who handles bills coming to the floor. Then ask to talk to that person. Be willing to hold a while or even call back later to get him or her. You may never get exactly the right staff person, but often you will, and you'll certainly get somebody.

When you get the staffer on the phone, introduce yourself. Give them your address so they know you live in the legislator's district. Ask for his or her name, then write it down and save it. This is the beginning of that personal relationship I keep harping on.

Explain why you care about the bill you're calling about. If you're a person with a disability or a family member, say so. And if you're calling about, for example, the Crime Victims with Disabilities Act and you or someone you know has been the victim of abuse or another crime, tell the staffer that.

Then say directly that you are calling to ask the legislator to vote yes or no on the bill.

Ask the staff member if he or she knows how the legislator plans to vote. Probably not, but they may surprise you and know the answer.

A few calls like that sometimes can actually make a difference in a legislator's vote. Two or three such calls are usually worth more than 20 or 30 of those pre-written form emails that clog up legislators' inboxes.

Then there's the followup. After the vote, find out how your legislator voted. You probably can get that information through [www.leginfo.gov](http://www.leginfo.gov). If that doesn't work, you can call the staffer you talked to originally – you have a personal relationship with him or her now – and ask how the legislator voted. If you call and they don't know, ask them to put you on hold and check, or call you back. If they don't call you back, you call them. As many times as it takes.

If the legislator voted right, thank the staffer. If the legislator voted wrong, politely express your disappointment and ask why. Again, if the staffer doesn't know, ask him or her to find out and call you back. If they don't call you back, you call them. As many times as it takes.

Writing the legislator a letter to thank them for voting right or express your disappointment with them for voting wrong is also a good idea. It's OK to use the US mail for a letter like that. Send it to the attention of the staffer you talked to. You're probably going to be talking to him or her again the next time.

Thank you for your advocacy.

Greg

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