

LEGISLATION

Tips for Writing Letters to Elected Officials



Communicating with elected officials in writing (via email or regular mail) is an incredibly important aspect of effective advocacy. Elected officials and their staffs have significant and ongoing interest in understanding the thoughts and beliefs of their constituents on issues of importance to them. As such, effective written communications from constituents, particularly at a high volume, can go a long way in helping to inform elected officials on both public policy and political considerations and potentially sway their decision-making and voting choices in your direction.

WHEN WRITING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

- ✓ **DO** include your name, address, and organizational information. Elected officials will typically respond in writing to your correspondence, so it is best to provide them with your contact information. Your address will also let them know if you're a constituent.
- ✓ If writing a letter as an individual, **DO** recognize that letters from constituents are valued well-above letters from non-constituents. Although it depends on the office, staff may simply forward letters received from outside of their district to the elected official who represents that district.
- ✓ **DO** keep your letter to one issue at a time. Keeping your letter to one issue at a time will make it more likely that your position will be appropriately tabulated and that you receive a response.
- ✓ **DO** be polite and respectful in your letter. Also, **DO** avoid using partisan or political rhetoric that could undermine the impact of your letter.
- ✓ **DO** refer to the elected official by their title, (i.e. Representative, Congressman, Senator, etc.)
- ✓ **DO** be clear about the action you want the elected official to take. Do you want them to support or oppose a particular piece of legislation? Join a caucus? Attend a meeting or press conference?
- ✓ If you're writing about a particular piece of legislation, **DO** be sure to include the bill number in your letter. Again, this will help the office properly tabulate your correspondence and increase your chances of receiving a response.
- ✓ **DO** properly time your letter so that it arrives at the elected official's office in advance of, yet coinciding with, legislative or other consideration of your issue.

Elected officials tend to move from one issue to the next depending on the schedule of his or her chamber of the legislature. Letters that are properly timed to arrive when an elected official's attention is on your issue may carry more weight.

- ✓ **DO** consider writing your letter (neatly) by hand. Anecdotal evidence suggests that personal and handwritten letters may bear more weight in some offices than emailed, bulk letters. At the same time, showing overwhelming numbers on your side, handwritten or otherwise, is also very important.
- ✓ **DO** mention your power by highlighting how many members your REA has and/or how many teachers, both active and retired, live in your district/state. These numbers will serve to show your clout in the community and the votes you can bring to bear.

PERSONALIZING YOUR LETTER

- ✓ **DO** humanize the subject of public pensions by telling personal stories about the individuals who earned them and who rely on these benefits. Opponents of public pensions will likely make their case based on budgets, numbers and fear. It is therefore important that we humanize our arguments and make this discussion about real people who have worked hard, paid into the system and earned their keep.
- ✓ **DO** focus on the earned nature of these benefits. Teachers have been contributing to their pension each and every paycheck and have earned their benefits. Take every opportunity to remind legislators and the public of this fact. Moreover, your timely contributions to your own pension can be contrasted with a state's lack of payments to the pension fund if applicable.
- ✓ **DO** talk about the dedication of teachers who spent their whole careers serving others and their communities, often taking money out of their own pockets to help their students learn.
- ✓ **DO** try to expand your arguments beyond teachers to how public pensions help the economy and taxpayers. The AARP/NRTA/NIRS State Facts sheets, as well

as NIRS' Pensionomics 2014 report, are wonderful resources that can help you show the positive impact that public pension benefits have on state and local economies, job creation, tax revenues, and in preventing costs associated with employee turnover.

- ✓ **DO** acknowledge shortfalls in pension funding, but **DO** also put those shortfalls into context. For example, how long can the pension pay 100% of promised benefits / over how many years can the shortfall be made up, or how much is the shortfall as a percentage of the state's budget? In addition, what has already been done to fix the shortfall?
- ✓ If you are writing about a plan to move new hires from the current defined benefit system into a 401(k)-type program, **DO** talk about the transition costs of moving to such a new system. Running two systems is more expensive than running one, while doing nothing to pay down any financial shortfalls in the first system. As a matter of fact, freezing the pension system to new hires makes existing shortfalls even worse.
- ✓ **DO** talk about the fact that all hard-working Americans should have a secure retirement and that there is broad public support for the financial security afforded by pensions.

AFTER WRITING

- ✓ **DO** be on the lookout for a response from the elected official either in your mailbox or email's inbox and consider sharing that response with your REA leadership. Elected officials will typically highlight their beliefs on an issue in their response to your letter. Accumulating these positions may be of use to your REA leadership and can help inform their decisions around future targeting.
- ✓ **DO** keep the pressure on. If you don't receive a timely response to your correspondence or remain unclear on the elected official's position on your issue, feel free to reach out to the office via phone to inquire. This will also give you another chance to express your opinions about your issue.