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EFFECTIVE WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH LEGISLATORS

Your legislators receive an enormous amount of mail, e-mails and phone call from their constituents on a day-to-day basis. Due to their fulltime schedules, and sometimes fulltime jobs outside the Legislature, they have a limited ability to personally read and respond to all of their correspondence. In addition, the thousands of bills and budget items a legislator must consider annually makes it near impossible to focus on every issue.

So, with all of the correspondence, bills and committees taking up a legislator's time, how can you ensure that your voice is heard? We have provided some tips on how to effectively communicate to your legislators.

GENERAL TIPS

- ❖ Know who your legislators are and how to contact them. The Florida Legislature's Web site, <http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Welcome/>, will help you access almost any information you need regarding the Legislature. It is recommended that you become familiar with the Web site if you want to follow legislation through the process.
- ❖ Focus on ways you can assist your legislator, rather than how they can help you. When a legislator can count on you as a resource or expert, your input and advice will have greater value.
- ❖ Make sure you understand the legislative process. Even the most basic understanding of the process will help you effectively express your ideas and opinions. Understand that subtle changes occur in the process from time to time, so having a good rapport with your legislator can be essential to keeping on top of legislative nuances.
- ❖ Planting a seed with your legislator early is the most effective way to communicate.
- ❖ If you cannot say it in an elevator ride, you are taking a chance of being misunderstood.
- ❖ Always attach your business card to any packets of information or materials you leave for a legislator and provide a business card to each staffer you meet.
- ❖ DO NOT underestimate staff. The legislator's aide is the gatekeeper to the member. The staff is an extension of the member, so if a member is unable to meet with you due to time constraints, and you meet with the staff, talk to them as if you were speaking with the legislator.

- ❖ Focus on one staff person, preferably a legislative aide, in each office to be your key contact for that legislator's office.
- ❖ DO NOT include your legislators in mass mailings and e-mails to multiple parties. Legislators and government officials are rightfully suspicious of these mass communications and often times do not respond.
- ❖ DO NOT communicate with your legislator and their staff too often. Be their friend and ally, but avoid being a pest. Give them time to respond to you and treat your conversations as confidential.
- ❖ DO NOT name drop unnecessarily.
- ❖ Tell your legislator what effect you think a particular bill, if it becomes law, will have on you, your children, your profession, your business and/or your community. Be concise, but specific.
- ❖ Be polite, even if you disagree strongly with the legislator you are addressing. Lawmakers cannot please everyone. Your communication will be more effective if you are reasonable in your approach. Remember, there is a good chance you will need to visit with your legislator again in the future, so make sure you are welcome to return.
- ❖ Suggest a course of action and offer assistance. DO NOT make promise or threats.
- ❖ Have a CAN DO, positive attitude. Use tact at all times, respect works wonders.

WRITING EFFECTIVE LETTERS

- ❖ Address letters to members of the House of Representatives as follows:

The Honorable John Doe
Florida House of Representatives
Street Address, Capitol Suite #
Tallahassee, FL Zip Code

- ❖ Address letters to senators as follows:

The Honorable Jane Doe
The Florida Senate
Street Address, Capitol Suite #
Tallahassee, FL Zip Code

- ❖ Be absolutely certain you spell your legislator's name correctly, and use the correct address. If you do not, you could lose your audience. Also, make sure you know the legislator's gender...this sounds obvious; however, if you address a legislator by "he" instead of "she" or vice versa, you might lose the legislator's attention.
- ❖ Sometimes it is best to contact the legislator's staff prior to sending the letter and ask if it is appropriate to write "attention to" a particular staff person on the envelope. This is a great way

to ensure the staff is aware of your correspondence before it is ever received, and it is a relatively innocent way to introduce yourself to the staff.

- ❖ Keep your letter or e-mail short and sweet—ONE PAGE ONLY.
- ❖ Type or print legibly. Sign your name neatly and give your address correctly so they can respond to your letter. Also, attach a business card, so the staff has your information for their file.
- ❖ Identify your issue or opinion at the beginning of the letter—do not bury your main point.
- ❖ Address only one issue per letter. If you have another issue, write another letter.
- ❖ Back up your opinions with supporting facts. Your letter should inform the reader. To save space, consider citing references, like Web sites and other materials.
- ❖ Avoid abbreviations or acronyms, and do not use technical jargon. Rather than impressing your reader, such terms will only frustrate him or her.
- ❖ Do not send the same letter to more than one legislator in the House and Senate. If you are sending a letter to your local representative and senator, draft the same letter to both of them and copy the other on the letter. For example, for your letter to the representative, you would copy the senator, and for the senator's letter, you would copy the representative. This allows the elected officials to know that they each received correspondence regarding the same issue.
- ❖ Personalize your letter—that has more impact.

CALLING OR VISITING YOUR LEGISLATOR

- ❖ Plan your call or visit carefully. Keep to the point and discuss only one issue. Organize your thoughts ahead of time and make notes to help you stay on track. During session, understand that most legislators only schedule five to fifteen minute meetings. You will probably receive more time if you visit your legislator in the district office when it is not session.
- ❖ When calling the Tallahassee office for an appointment, provide the legislator's office with your cell phone number in case they need to reschedule your appointment. Many times, your appointment may be moved up or down during the day depending on the legislator's schedules. Most aides will call you about the change in time.
- ❖ If you are visiting your legislator in Tallahassee, even though he or she is usually accommodating to constituents, do not be surprised if that means you have two minutes to walk them to a committee meeting.
- ❖ Prepare a one-page or less fact sheet concerning your issue to give to your legislator, along with your contact information. This will help him or her better retain what you present.

- ❖ DO NOT “drop by” your legislator’s Tallahassee office and expect to be seen. Scheduling an appointment is best—for you and the legislator. Sometimes you may be able to drop by and see staff...just ask with a smile.
- ❖ Be flexible with your schedule. Chances are that the time will change during the day.

UNDERSTANDING THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

- ❖ Either chamber may originate any type of legislation; however, the processes differ slightly between chambers.
- ❖ A legislator sponsors a bill, which is referred to one or more committees related to the bill’s subject matter. The committee members study the bill and decide if it should be amended, pass or fail. If the bill passes, the bill moves to other committees of reference or to the full chamber if it has passed through all of its committee assignments. The full chamber then votes on the bill.
- ❖ If the bill passes in one chamber, it is sent to the other chamber for review. A bill goes through the same process in the second chamber as it did in the first. A bill can go back and forth between chambers until a consensus is reached. Of course, the bill can fail at any point in the process.
- ❖ However, no issue, bill or budget item is truly dead until Sine Die.
- ❖ Finally, if a bill passes both chambers, it goes to the Governor to either sign into law or veto.