



Drug Policy Alliance
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Calling Your Federal Legislators

Members of Congress' offices can be reached through the U.S. Capital Switchboard at (202) 224-3121. When you call, ask to be connected to the office of your legislator.

Be aware of timing. The most effective time to place a call to your Member of Congress is close to a vote or committee hearing. It is not required that you write a letter or have made an attempt to contact your member prior to a phone call, but it is helpful. If you have written or visited with your legislator in the past remind them or their staff.

Think carefully about the reason for your call before you pick up the phone. The goal is to clearly state what action you want your legislator to take. The call will be brief, so you want to know exactly what you're asking the legislator to do so you can get right to the point.

Identify yourself, make sure they understand that you are a concerned voter and tell the aide you would like to leave a brief message, for example: "Please tell Senator/ Representative (Name) that I support/oppose (S.___/H.R.___).

Ask to speak with the aide who handles your issue. If you want to do more than leave a simple message, you want to make sure you're talking to the person who works on the issue. Usually, a staff member, not the Member of Congress, will take your telephone calls. Make clear your position and the action you think your member should take. Feel free to ask questions and share information about your issue, but be concise and considerate.

Tips for Talking to Congress

Legislators appreciate hearing from their constituents, and they are elected to represent our views. Always give your legislator your name, address, and telephone number so that they know you are one of their constituents. Be sure to include this information whether you visit in person, call, or write.

When you contact your legislators, a short sentence or two about why you personally support or oppose a certain proposal is fine.

Most importantly, always be courteous and clear when communicating with your legislators. Remember, legislators are people, too!



We are
the Drug
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Do

- Be specific and ask for action
- Use time to your advantage
- Carefully plan a strategy
- Voice your position and solicit support from your legislator
- Know your issue, and tell the truth
- Share information
- Always be punctual, polite, and patient
- Be respectful
- Follow-up: Write a thank you note

Don't

- Burn bridges
- Waste time
- Lie
- Exaggerate statistics
- Make promises you can't deliver
- Be argumentative

More Tips

Timing is very important. If the legislation you are concerned about is imminent, contacting your legislator quickly by phone or e-mail can be very effective. However, if you have time, take advantage of several influence techniques, such as writing a letter, or meeting with your elected Members of Congress and/or their staff members. The key is to use timing to your advantage.

Meet with staffers. Staffers are the key to getting work done. It is important to develop a working relationship with staffers who are assigned to your issue. When it comes time for action, knowing someone to call will pay off. The key is to develop a network that can put your action into play.

Voice your position to your Members of Congress. Legislators frequently act on behalf of their constituency, even if your legislator does not currently support your position it can be extremely helpful to contact them. Make your concerns vocal, and solicit support from your Member of Congress.

Know the issue. Legislators have several issues they are concerned with at any given time. Be sure that you have ready information based on sound, scientific research. Ask questions about your Members' feelings toward a particular issue, and be ready for your legislators to ask you questions about your position. Knowledge is power.

Share information. It is very important to relay any information you receive from your legislator to the members of your organization, community, family and friends. Information helps to broaden the audience.



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Meeting With Your Legislators

Schedule a Visit. Check your legislator's website — www.house.gov or www.senate.gov — or call the office and ask to speak to the scheduler to find out how to set up a meeting. Many offices require a written request.

You may be granted a meeting with a staff member instead of the legislator – this can be just as valuable because legislators rely on their staff for issue expertise.

Prepare for the Visit. Research your legislator's record on the issue — you can look up votes at www.congress.gov

Plan your arguments. A friendly legislator can be thanked for their leadership and asked to do more. An undecided legislator can be swayed with compelling personal stories. A hostile legislator can be reminded that they have constituents who will be hurt by their position.

If you are going as part of a group, decide who will bring up which points.

Choose a specific request, such as asking the legislator to vote for or against a certain bill.

If possible, create one or two handouts to leave with the legislator, such as fact sheets, relevant news articles, signed petitions, or letters from constituents.

Conduct the Visit. Arrive wearing a suit, if possible. Expect some initial small talk. Introduce yourself (or your group), and explain the reason for your visit.

After you make your points, conclude with your request. Thank the official for something if at all possible.

Be prepared for questions, but keep returning to your central message. Stay respectful, even if the legislator disagrees with you. If you are asked for information you do not have, offer to get it. Never make things up!

Try to get the following information: Will the legislator support your position? If not, why not? When and how will they make a decision?

End on a positive note, thanking them for their time.

Follow Up. Send a thank you letter to the legislator or staffer you met with, along with any additional information you pledged to provide.