



Public Interest Alberta

MLA ADVOCACY GUIDE

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Purpose and Introduction

Thank you for your interest in making positive changes in your community. Advocating to your MLA about issues you care about is a step that will move our province in the right direction.

This guide is meant to serve as a resource to assist you in advocating for issues that matter to you, like protecting and strengthening our public services. This guide will provide suggestions on how to approach your MLA and how to express your concerns positively and productively.

Our upcoming 2017 Priorities for Change document is designed to bring attention to issues on the Alberta government's agenda. We encourage you to read and reference it alongside this advocacy guide. Many of the strategies in this guide are also adaptable to municipal and federal advocacy initiatives. The effectiveness of Public Interest Alberta's work is amplified when citizens are engaged on the issues and doing advocacy work of their own with their elected representatives.

How to contact your MLA

While there is much jurisdictional overlap in Canada, provincial governments have control over many key public services such as education, health care, and supports for our most vulnerable. That means your MLA has a voice in decisions in many of the areas that impact you and your community directly.

To find your MLA, start by visiting the Legislative Assembly website (www.assembly.ab.ca) to learn who your MLA is and how to contact them. Read their biography to learn more about them, what committees they sit on or roles they plan within the government, and their community affiliations. Visit your MLAs Facebook page or Twitter account, if they have one, to get up to date information on what they have been working on or any upcoming events they are having in your constituency. This will help to start you thinking about how to connect with the MLA's areas of interests or expertise when you meet.

Booking a Meeting with your MLA

It is important to remember that MLAs have busy schedules, so it may take both patience and persistence to find a time to meet. While there are many ways to contact an MLA, a good starting point is sending an email to their constituency office. Clearly state who you are and the reason you hope to meet, and provide a short summary of the issues you would like to discuss. See the Appendix for a sample email template. Be sure to keep it short and concise in your initial introduction email.

In all communications with the MLA's constituency office, maintain a positive and professional tone. Constituency staff are usually in charge of the MLA's calendar and their co-operation is crucial in arranging time to meet.

Your initial contact with the MLA's office should outline how much time you hope to spend with the MLA and provide a realistic timeline for when you would like to meet. Most MLAs will typically book meetings with constituents for approximately half an hour, so you will need to use your time wisely.

When booking a meeting, it is important to recognize that MLAs who serve constituencies outside Edmonton will be away from their constituency for significant periods of time in spring and fall while the Legislature is in session. Even Edmonton area MLAs may have little extra time to meet during sessions. If your MLA is in Cabinet, is an Critic for one of the opposition parties, or sits on numerous committees, they too may have infrequent office hours.

Tip: Find the most recent legislative Sessional Calendar at www.assembly.ab.ca. Your MLA is more likely to have time to meet on days when they are not sitting in the Legislature.

In your email, include contact information like a daytime phone number to make scheduling easier. You can also suggest a couple of dates and times that will work for you to begin the conversation about when you can meet. Let the MLA know if other community members will be joining the meeting with you. Limit the size of your group to three people to help facilitate an informal discussion environment. If your group is larger than three, consider splitting into smaller groups and requesting meetings separately.

After sending your email, allow a few days for a response. Constituency office staff may hold all meeting and engagement requests to review at a weekly meeting with the MLA.

Follow up with the Constituency office

If you do not receive an e-mail response, follow up with a phone call to the office. You may have to leave a message – provide your name, reference your e-mail with the date you sent it, and explain that you were hoping to meet with your MLA at their earliest convenience. Most MLAs consider it one of their duties to meet with constituents and serve as the eyes and ears of the government in their own communities. Many constituency offices receive a high volume of correspondence so as mentioned above, be patient and persistent.

The same steps apply when dealing with more senior government officials such as Cabinet Ministers and Opposition Leaders – but their time will likely be even more limited. Meeting with a constituency staff member is a realistic alternative and has the potential for further engagement on an issue. Constituency staff often work closely with the MLA and have a lot of influence, so don't be disappointed if you aren't able to meet with your MLA right away. However, do follow up after the meeting to try to get face time with the MLA.

Meeting Preparation

Congratulations – a meeting is booked! Now, get prepared to make effective use of your time.

- Clearly identify a short list of priorities and specific solutions to present in the meeting. A bullet-point agenda can help keep you focused;
- If applicable, review Public Interest Alberta’s Priorities for Change document so you have a clear understanding of the current situation and your suggestions for change
 - Fill out the sheet in the Appendix to help you organize your thoughts on the issue;
- Think about your audience. An MLA is expected to represent the public on a wide range of issues but is unlikely to have in-depth knowledge on all of them. Feel free to send information in advance and to bring some along with you, but keep all materials short to ensure the MLA and their staff have time to read it. A long report, lengthy video, or recorded speech is much less likely to be reviewed in time for your meeting than a focused, one or two-page overview of the issue;
- Think local – how can you explain the local impact of provincial issues? For example, a discussion about health care might reference issues with the local hospital. MLAs are always interested in issues that directly impact their constituency;
- Take a team approach. If you are meeting with your MLA as a group, ensure you get together before the meeting to discuss who will make introductions and how to maximize your time. Even though this is an informal meeting, you want to have a plan to ensure you cover the issues that matter. Give each person a task or issue to discuss and designate one person to take notes.

Meeting Etiquette

- Be on time;
- Stay on topic and keep it simple. Don’t waste too much time with introductory remarks. Be clear in what you are asking of your MLA;
- Be polite with constituency staff, building a connection with them can help you with booking future meetings;
- Watch the clock to ensure you are aware how much time is remaining in the meeting;
- Don’t try to extend the length of your meeting. Others are probably waiting and the MLA will want to share their time with as many constituents as possible;
- Be passionate but always polite and professional;
- Listen to what the MLA has to say on the topic. Even if you do not agree, this will establish that you are willing to engage in a dialogue, and you may learn valuable information on their position or their party’s position;
- Don’t argue with the MLA. If you are hitting a wall in one specific area, try to see if you can find common ground on an issue;
- Share the meeting time equally within your group. Plan how to do this to ensure that you appear organized and professional within the meeting;

- Leave the MLA with some printed material to help remember your positions. A copy of Priorities for Change is one example, or you can prepare your own one-page document in advance;
- If you do not know the answer to a question the MLA asks you, let them know you can follow up after the meeting with more information;
- Don't expect the MLA to commit to a position during the meeting. As a member of a larger party, the MLA must discuss issues with other members of their caucus.

In the Meeting

Going into the meeting, you may have some idea whether or not the MLA will be receptive to your positions and should be able to adjust your strategy accordingly.

If the MLA is largely in agreement with you on your issue:

- Talk about why it's important for the MLA to align with other MLAs in their party caucus on this issue to make changes happen;
- Move quickly to solutions if there is already agreement about the problem;
- Ask what action they are thinking of taking and provide feedback;
- Ask the MLA what actions you can take to support them on the issue;
- Even if an MLA agrees with your position, emphasize why this issue is important to you, your community, and their constituency. Let them know that you will be following up;
- Ask for a commitment from the MLA to raise the issue in a meeting of their party's caucus.

If the MLA disagrees with you on your issue:

- Explain your thoughts, your rationale, and why you care. Try to cite local examples of how community residents are impacted;
- Respectfully ask them for their position on the issue and why they feel that way. Perhaps there is additional information that would help inform your future advocacy efforts;
- Finish off by thanking the MLA for the meeting and letting them know you are available to consult on this or other community issues;
- Don't get discouraged. These are important issues to advocate for, and all efforts help make progress toward change.

Following up after your meeting

It is useful after the meeting for your group to get together and discuss your individual impressions of the conversation and plan on how to follow up. One goal should be to build a relationship with the MLA to keep their attention on the issues you discussed. Here are some ideas:

- Send a thank you note within 24 hours
 - Include a short summary of the issues you raised;
 - Send any additional materials you promised to provide;
 - Offer to be a resource on this issue.
- Look for relevant news stories that you can send to your MLA as a reminder of the positions you raised in the meeting;
- Put a reminder in your calendar to request another meeting six months later to keep the issues at the top of the MLA's agenda;
- Seek other opportunities to interact with the MLA. Are there upcoming community events that they will be attending? Those can be good opportunities to say hello and briefly mention your meeting, but remember to be respectful with the MLA's time at these events because other constituents will want time with them as well.

Other Actions

Meeting directly with MLAs is an important method of achieving your goals. There are other methods that can further enhance advocacy efforts. Here are some ideas:

- Encourage others to meet with the MLA to raise the issues you discussed. Share the materials and messaging you used in your meeting. MLAs are more likely to support a position that has wide community backing;
- Write a Letter to the Editor for your local newspaper. You have already learned a lot about the issue, so why not share it?
- Organize a group of fellow constituents who will continue to advocate for change and increase the number of people working on your issue;
- Start a petition and submit it to your MLA to show there is widespread public support for the issue you are advocating on. The Legislative Assembly of Alberta has particular rules around petitions so be sure to follow their guide at www.assembly.ab.ca/pro/petition_guide.pdf.

Conclusion

Once again, thank you for engaging in advocacy in your community! Together, we can build a fair and just Alberta for all. Achieving this goal will take time but every time someone speaks up for change, it helps us progress a little further. You can be confident that you are not working alone – thousands of Albertans share your vision for the province and are working alongside you to make it a reality.

Appendix

The following templates may be useful in contacting your MLA to arrange a meeting.

Find contact information through the Legislature website at www.assembly.ab.ca.

E-mail meeting request

To: Your.MLA@assembly.ab.ca

Subject line: Meeting request to discuss important community issue (be specific but brief)

Dear (MLA's name),

I would like to arrange a meeting with you to share information about an issue of importance to you and the residents of your constituency. I am a constituent and live in (neighbourhood).

(Short summary of issues: Introduce the issue you would like to discuss and why it is important to you and to your MLA's work.)

(List other people who would like to attend with you, and be sure to mention whether they are constituents or not.)

I know you have a busy schedule, and so please let me know a date and time that works for you in the coming weeks. I look forward to meeting with you.

Thank you for your time.

(Your name)

(Your contact phone number)

Phone script

Leave a message if there is no answer – these will be processed and forwarded to the appropriate staff member.

Hello. My name is (your name), and I am a resident of (constituency name). I sent an email last week requesting a meeting and wanted to follow up with you to arrange a date and time. I can be reached at (your phone number) or by e-mail at (your e-mail address). Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Questions to help you prepare for meeting with your MLA

- Describe the issue in 3 sentences or less.
- Why is it important to you and how does it impact your community?
- What are the effects on the specific constituency?
- What are potential solutions to the issue?
- What are you asking your MLA to do?