

Tips for Calling Your Elected Officials

While not as influential as personal visits or written correspondence, telephone calls can be an extremely effective way for you to communicate your views on a given issue. It is also a relatively safe way of communicating if you are new to advocacy and a face-to-face meeting makes you a little bit anxious. To prepare, jot down a few notes of the key points you want to make so that you can refer to your notes when calling.

Although it is generally most effective for you to call your elected official in their capitol office, which is where most of their staff is located, you may also call the district office in order to avoid a toll call.

Unless you have a prior relationship with the Member, you will rarely speak with him or her directly when you call. In fact, when calling, ask for the legislative aide who covers health issues, including substance abuse. Remember that this is most likely the person who researches and briefs the Member on bills or funding issues, so it is very important that s/he hear from constituents and understand the local impact of the Member's action.

In some cases, you may not be able to speak directly to the health aide in a Member's office. In such cases, you can leave a message with the person who answers the phone, who will either pass your message on to the staff member, or, in the case of many Congressional offices, will enter it into a computer database used to track constituent calls. Be sure to tell him or her your name, what city you live in (if you're calling a Member of Congress, the receptionist may ask for your zip code to verify that you live in the Member's district) and the name or bill number and position you are advocating.

For example, your conversation might go as follows: "Hello. My Name is Jack Jones. I'm a constituent who lives in Sonoma and I'm calling to request that Congresswoman Chang support a \$75 million increase in funding for substance abuse prevention in fiscal year 2001."