



A Citizen's Guide to Participation in the Wisconsin State Legislature

Prepared by the Wisconsin Legislative Council Staff, 2017

How to Contact Your Legislator

Have you ever been told by a friend or co-worker, when you were expressing frustration about something, "You ought to call your legislator"? If you have, you are not alone, judging from the volume of contacts legislators receive from their constituents. An informal survey of legislative offices revealed that each office receives anywhere from 1,000 to 5,000 such contacts in a year.

REASONS TO CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATOR

Constituents contact their legislators for various reasons. Here are some of the more common reasons:

- **To register a position on a bill or a specific topic.** One of the most common reasons for contacting your legislator is simply to tell him or her how you feel about something. It may be a bill that the Legislature will be voting on in the near future or a general topic that the Legislature is likely to take up. You may agree or disagree with your legislator's position on the subject. Whatever the case, a brief phone call or short e-mail message is usually all it takes to register your position. Legislative offices record this information, so that the legislator knows how his or her constituents feel.
- **To request or recommend legislation on a specific topic.** Ideas for legislation come from many sources. One of these sources is individuals who contact their legislators--the citizen who decides that "there ought to be a law." Your suggestion for legislation may relate to general public policy, such as reducing taxes or ensuring adequate funding for a particular program, or it may be a very specific recommendation in response to a particular problem that you have encountered.
- **To find out what the law or state policy is on a particular topic.** One of the key elements of a democratic society is an informed public, which includes knowing what the law is and what policies and programs your government is implementing. That is

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more than any one person can know, but your legislator's office can help you find this sort of information.

- **To seek advice or assistance regarding a problem with state government.** Do you think you have been treated unfairly by a state agency? Do you feel like you are being given a bureaucratic run-around? Your legislator's office may be able to help you break that log jam, find the right person for you to talk to, or help you understand what rights you have to appeal a government decision.
- **To seek advice or assistance regarding a problem with other entities.** You may have a problem with an entity outside of state government. For example, you may have a billing problem with your electric utility that you have not been able to resolve or you may feel that you were tricked into buying something by deceptive advertising. Your legislator's office may be able to help you find resources to resolve your problem, such as finding staff at the Public Service Commission to help you deal with that billing problem or staff at the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection to look into deceptive advertising.

TOPICS YOUR LEGISLATOR CANNOT HELP WITH

There are definite limits to what a legislator or the legislator's staff can help you with. Be aware of these limits so that you know what is reasonable to expect when you contact your legislator. The following are topics legislators get asked about regularly:

- **Legal advice.** While your legislator's office can help you find a certain amount of information regarding the law, your legislator cannot give you legal advice. In many cases, individuals need legal representation to address a problem, and your legislator cannot substitute for this.
- **Court issues.** Court issues can only be addressed in the judicial branch of government. Your legislator cannot influence these proceedings, and it would be totally inappropriate for a legislator to try to do so. Again, in these cases, you may need legal representation.
- **Financial advice.** Legislators are not trained financial advisors but, still, some constituents ask them for financial advice. These constituents should see a qualified financial advisor.
- **Federal issues.** Some issues are a matter of federal, rather than state jurisdiction. States have no control over programs administered by the federal government and state legislators have little influence over federal agencies. If you contact your state legislator on one of these issues, he or she is likely to refer you to your representative to Congress.
- **Local issues.** Similarly, local issues are outside the province of state legislators. However, your legislator may be able to put you in touch with someone in local government who can help resolve a problem.

HOW DO I CONTACT MY LEGISLATOR?

The first step in contacting your legislator is knowing who your legislator is. The easiest way to do this is the tool found on the Legislature's home page, at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov>. In the center of that page is a link that says Find My Legislators. Click on that link and fill in the form to get the names of your state representative and senator.

If you do not have computer access, you can call your local town, village, or city clerk's office to find out who represents you in the state Legislature. Your local library may be able to help you with this also.

There are of course several ways that you can contact your legislator:

- **Phone.** You can contact your legislator by phone, in the district, or at his or her Capitol office in Madison. You can find these phone numbers on the members' home pages. To find these, go to the Legislature's Home Page, at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov>, click on "Senators" or "Representatives," and then scroll down to find your legislator.
- **E-mail.** The e-mail addresses of members of the Wisconsin Legislature all have the same format. For members of the Assembly, the form is Rep.Jones@legis.wisconsin.gov; for members of the Senate, the form is Sen.Adams@legis.wisconsin.gov.
- **Mail.** You can reach your legislator by mail at one of the following addresses:
 - Representatives whose last names begin with a letter from A to L:
 - P.O. Box 8952, Madison, 53708-8952
 - Representatives whose last names begin with a letter from M to Z:
 - P.O. Box 8953, Madison, 53708-8952
 - All Senators:
 - P.O. Box 7882, Madison, 53707-7882

In addition, many legislators keep "office hours" or conduct listening sessions in their districts. These are specifically designed to give constituents direct access to the legislator. Watch the newspapers for announcements, or call the legislator's Capitol office to ask if the legislator is planning such a session.

THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN CONTACTING YOUR LEGISLATOR

- **Contact your own legislator.** If you have strong feelings about a bill, there is the temptation to contact the author to express your views, even if the author is not your legislator. You are certainly free to do so, but be aware that a legislator will give less weight to the opinion of residents of another legislative district. If you are requesting assistance, it is particularly important to contact your own legislators.

- **Give your name and contact information.** If you are asking for assistance, your legislator will need to know how to contact you. Put this information on the letter you send (if you send a letter), in case the envelope is lost or discarded, and on any email communications.
- **Ask for a response.** In particular, ask what your legislator's position is on the topic you are writing or calling about. As a constituent, you are entitled to know.
- **Be specific and clear.** If you are calling in regard to legislation, be sure you know the bill number before you call. If you are calling to recommend legislation, describe the problem that you believe needs to be addressed and, if you have a particular solution in mind, describe that as well. Also, be sure to state your reasons for the positions you want your legislator to take.

If you are calling for advice or assistance, describe the problem well. Give as many details as you can and do not withhold information. Your legislator's staff will need a complete picture of the problem if they are to help you.

- **Be timely.** If you want to influence a vote, you need to get your correspondence to your legislator before the vote is taken.
- **Be personal.** To have the greatest impact, take the time to learn about the issue and then sit down and write a letter in your own words or make a phone call stating your own thoughts. On particularly controversial topics, advocacy groups deluge legislators with hundreds of identical post cards or phone calls. To be sure, legislators count these contacts, but give them much less weight than individually composed communications.

In addition, to the extent possible, base your comments on your own experiences. A personal story has much more impact than a generic statement of position.

- **Be reasonable.** Try not to ask for something your legislator cannot do.
- **Be courteous.** If you are calling because you disagree with your legislator, remember common courtesy. Your first contact most likely will be with your legislator's staff, who is working to help you, even if you disagree with your legislator.