

Effectively Communicating to Impact Counseling Legislation

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What we want to do...

- ⦿ Write approximately a one single-spaced page letter.
- ⦿ Use personal or business stationery.
- ⦿ Include your name, return address, and telephone number including area code on the letter.
- ⦿ Hand write letters if they are legible; otherwise, type.
- ⦿ Name the bill's sponsoring Member(s).
 - <http://www.legislature.state.oh.us/>
 - http://thomas.loc.gov/home/bills_res.html
- ⦿ Spell the legislator's name correctly.
- ⦿ Use appropriate title (Representative, Senator, etc.). Elected officials are addressed as "Honorable."

What we want to do...

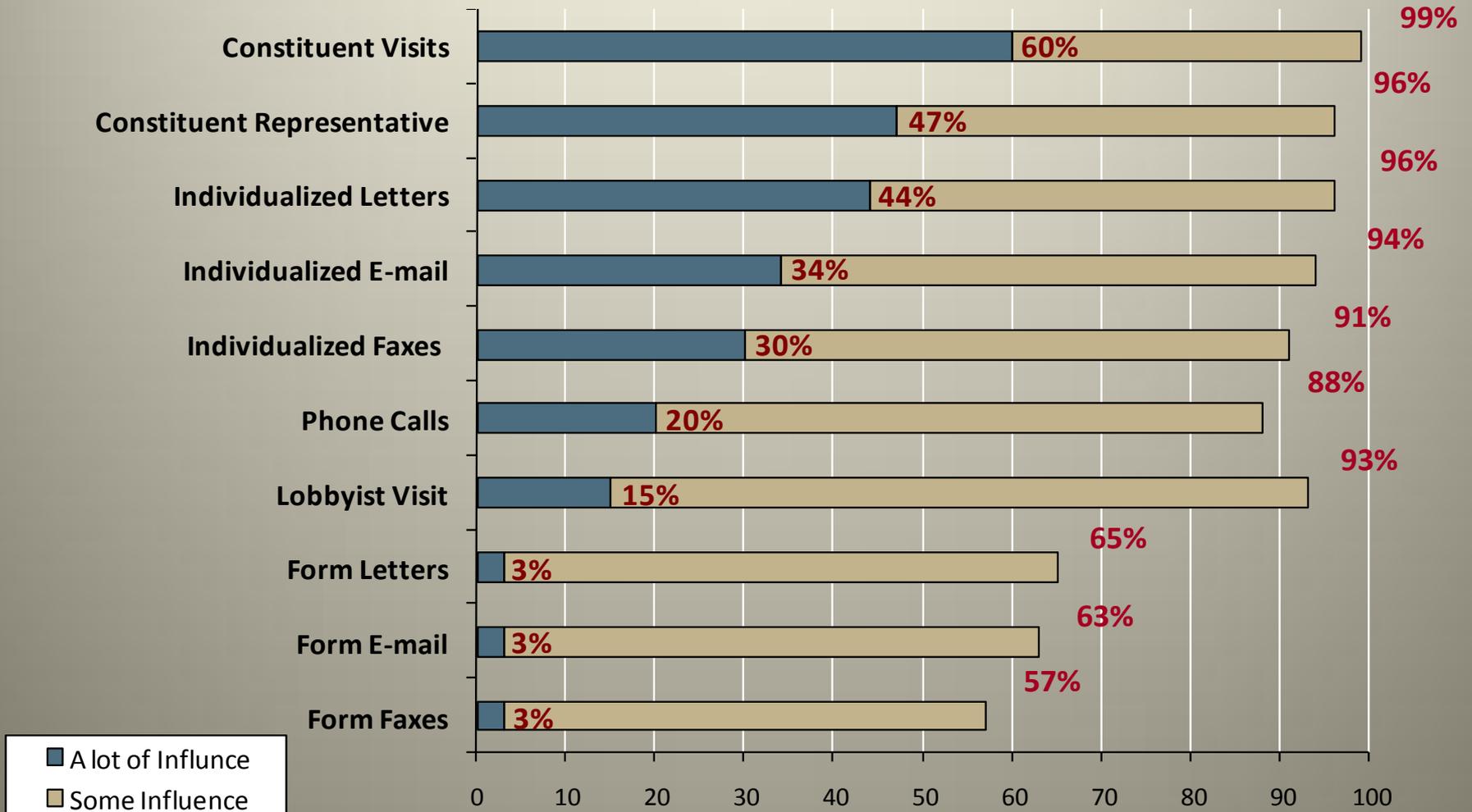
- Double check the legislator's address.
- Cover only one subject per letter and clearly identify it. At the top write, "Re: (name and number of bill)."
- If you know the legislator or staff aide personally, mention it at the start of your letter.
- State you are an individual constituent to the legislator.
- Say who you are, why you are writing, and list credentials.

What we want to do...

- ⦿ ***Tell your story in your own words. Stories make a big impact.***
- ⦿ One thoughtful and well-argued message can have more impact than a thousand letters or calls. So few take the time to craft thoughtful, personal letters it almost guarantees that you'll capture the interest and attention of someone in the office.
- ⦿ It sends a signal that you really care about the issue.
- ⦿ Read by someone of intelligence, but less informed than you about this particular issue.

"If your Member has not already arrived at a firm decision on an issue, how much influence might the following advocacy strategies directed to the Washington office have on his/her decision?"

- Congressional Management Foundation



What we want to do...

- Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- ◉ Use **concrete examples** about how the topic affects you and others and/or propose constructive alternatives.
- ◉ Make letters timely – Legislators appreciate having your views and information while the issue is before him/her.
- ◉ Ask the legislator to do something specific. “Please vote for/against [number of the bill]” or “I recommend the following changes to” Indicate why it is important to you that they take action regarding your problem or request.
- ◉ Indicate your thanks & restate most important message.
- ◉ Run spell/grammar check before sending the letter.

Follow-up 2-3 weeks after your initial request!

- ⦿ This is 2-way communication. Follow-up to see what happened!
- ⦿ Write back to their response with another brief letter.
 - If they agree, send a letter of thanks.
 - If they disagree, reply with a brief letter quoting the section of the letter with which you take issue, restate your position, and supply additional evidence to support your stand.
- ⦿ Some legislators will ignore your first request. It isn't until you ask again that they realize you are serious.
- ⦿ **Send a thank you note when they do something right!**

What we want to avoid...

- ⦿ Writing letters that demand the legislator's cooperation.
- ⦿ Writing a form letter.
- ⦿ Threatening defeat at the next election.
- ⦿ Adopting a politically partisan tone in your letter.
- ⦿ Chronic letter writing. Choose issues wisely.
- ⦿ Using the legislator's first name in the salutation of your letter unless you know them personally.
- ⦿ Getting discouraged!

Avoid writing other people's legislators!

- ⦿ *What should I do when the fate of an issue I care about rests in the hands of an elected official who doesn't represent me?*
- ⦿ Ask your own elected officials to advocate for your position with their colleagues. Ask them to write a letter, have a meeting, or make a phone call on your behalf. Working with your own elected official in these situations is a much better and more effective use of your time than mailing or calling someone else's legislator.

Need to find your legislator?

- ◎ US House

- <https://writerep.house.gov/writerep/welcome.shtm>
|

- ◎ US Senate

- <http://www.senate.gov/>

Federal counseling legislation information

◎ ACA

- <http://www.counseling.org/PublicPolicy/>
 - General info about federal counseling legislation
- <http://capwiz.com/counseling/home/>
 - Sign up for Gov't Relations Listserv
 - Call to action on current federal legislation

In what capacity are you writing? You could be writing as a...

- ⦿ **constituent**, a voter telling your legislator your views on some issue, regardless of your direct stake.
- ⦿ **stakeholder**, someone directly affected by a policy decision (a counselor who is impacted by legislation)
- ⦿ **expert**, someone who has particular and specialized knowledge about the issue under debate.
- ⦿ **representative** of some group. In this case, you are writing not your personal views, but reflecting the collective views of the group you are speaking for.

How to begin...

- ⦿ **Introduce Yourself:** 1) You are constituent and deserve to be heard. 2) You are a professional who is directly impacted by this legislation. Convince the reader that yours is a voice of experience and wisdom.
- ⦿ **Be specific:** Ask them to take action! Support for legislation, make a public statement in support of a program, or a visit to a program or facility in the district. *Rush to the floor to support Ohio SB 53!*
- ⦿ **Marshall Facts:** Your argument must be supported by facts. *Personal experiences are particularly effective and often moving.* Share your story, *but be mindful of our client's confidentiality!!!*
- ⦿ **Be Polite:** Staffers don't appreciate being spoken down to or insulted. You are trying to rally them to your cause, so be nice.
- ⦿ **Clearly State Your Request:** Plainly tell your legislator that you want them to support (or oppose) a certain bill.

The opposition...

- ⦿ The staff person most likely will hear from the other side.
- ⦿ Don't vilify opponents. Refrain from labeling those who disagree as unenlightened or idiots.
- ⦿ Fairly presenting the other side's argument and then explaining why we have the stronger counter-argument builds trust.
- ⦿ If honest about the disagreement up front, the staff person is more likely believe us in the long run.
- ⦿ Leaves the impression that we have nothing to fear from the staff person knowing the other side of the story.

Connect letter to the legislator

- Help them to understand how the issues you care about connect to real, live people in their district.
- Capture their attention by learning what issues they care most about and tying your interests to theirs.
 - If they care about health care, how do your issues connect to health care concerns?
 - Read their biography on their website to find their interests

3 parts to a great letter...

- 1) Tell them what you're going to tell them -** Introduce yourself and describe your credentials. Explain your support for or against a bill.
- 2) Tell them -** Discuss the issue and explain your stand by being specific and practical. Cite relevant facts, avoiding emotion. Relate the points of your message to your personal experience and their interests.
- 3) Tell them what you told them -** Request (not demand) a specific action. Thank them for consideration of your views. Offer them assistance if they have questions. "Can I count on ...?" This requires a response.

What about e-mail?

- *Most (but not all)* legislative offices pay attention to e-mails
- Follow the same “rules” of content and relevance discussed for letter writing mentioned earlier

Example Ohio SB 53 Letter

The Honorable Richard Nero
Ohio House of Representatives
77 South High Street, District 42
Columbus, Ohio 43215

RE: Ohio Senate Bill 53 – Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor’s Ability to Sign Ohio’s Mental Health Hold

November 21, 2008

Dear Representative Nero,

I urge you to support Ohio SB 53 sponsored by Senator Clancy, which allows Licensed Professional Clinical Counselors (LPCCs) the ability to sign the State’s mental health hold. As a constituent who is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) in the State of Ohio and a doctoral student in Counseling & Human Development Services at Kent State University who will soon educate future counselors, I thought I should bring the positive effects of this bill to your attention.

If passed, Ohio SB 53 will allow LPCCs (who already have the ability to diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders in the State of Ohio) to appropriately treat clients exhibiting severe suicidality/homicidality. Ohio SB 53 grants LPCCs in this situation the ability to sign the State’s mental health hold so that the client can be transported to the hospital where an examination can be conducted by a psychiatrist/physician to make a determination as to whether or not the client should be admitted. Right now the clients of counselors in the State of Ohio are at risk daily of being lost in the system without Ohio SB 53 being enacted. Because counselors are forbidden to sign the State mental health hold, our clients are at the mercy of strangers to understand the severity of the situation when we have already developed a relationship with the client and understand the risks involved.

Example Ohio SB 53 Letter

A recent client of mine was homicidal and afraid to return to her apartment building for fear she would kill a next door neighbor. The client sought emergency services from the clinic where I was working and I was assigned as her counselor. After spending 1.5 hours with the client, I assessed that she would indeed violently harm and possibly kill if the other individual was even spotted. I sought out my supervisor who concurred with this determination. As my supervisor was not able to sign the State mental health hold, we were forced to call the police. When the officer arrived, he asked the client if she would LIKE to be taken to the hospital even after my attempts to get the officer to understand that transport was a necessity and not an option. Luckily, the client wanted services and agreed to go. What might have been the outcome if she had refused because the officer allowed her to leave and then she had harmed the other person?

The State of Ohio has given counselors the ability to diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders, but not to follow through on our professional code of ethics not to mention State licensing obligations. Physicians and psychologists have come out in opposition to Ohio SB 53 stating that if counselors are granted the ability to sign the State mental health hold, it will unduly burden the system. Counselors are already groveling every day to physicians, psychologists, and police officers who can sign the mental health hold to provide constituents in your district the best mental health care possible. In my opinion, the opposition to Ohio SB 53 seems more like a professional turf battle. I am more interested in the care of my clients and the safety of our district over a turf battle. I believe your passion for health care places you in a position to truly understand the negative implications of Ohio SB 53 failing in the Ohio House of Representatives.

I urge you to support Ohio SB 53. Can I count on your vote? I look forward to hearing your answer. I thank you for taking the time to consider my opinion on this matter. I hope that my expressed concern will make a difference in your decision. If you need additional information, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Stephanie T. Burns, LPC, NCC
123 Main Street
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio 44221
330-923-5555 sburns1@XXXX.com

Example Public Law 109-461

The Honorable Steven C. LaTourette
2371 Rayburn House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Public Law 109-461 (Veterans Benefits, Healthcare, and Information Technology Act)

November 21, 2008

Dear Representative LaTourette,

I am writing to request action to include professional counselors in the delivery of mental health services per the Veterans Benefits, Healthcare, and Information Technology Act, now Public Law 109-461, which was sponsored by Senator Larry E. Craig. Unfortunately, the Veterans Administration (VA) has been slow in creating policies to permit licensed professional counselors the ability to apply for and be hired into mental health counseling jobs. As a constituent who is a Licensed Professional Counselor (PC) in the State of Ohio and a doctoral student in Counseling & Human Development Services at Kent State University who will soon educate future counselors, I thought I should bring the positive effects of fully enacting this Public Law, which was signed by the President on December 22, 2006, to your attention.

An Associated Press story earlier in 2008 referenced a “watchdog” organization estimate that as many as 20 percent of those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and many are attempting to adjust to continued military service and return to civilian life with insufficient mental health counseling and related services. A number of the issues associated with troop suicide were the subject of an in-depth story on PBS's News Hour on November 9th. The mental health needs of our veterans demand that they be provided the best possible care. There are over 6,000 licensed professional counselors in the State of Ohio with extensive practicum and internship experiences, which prepare them to provide quality mental health services to our veterans. Right now our brave veterans are facing an overwhelming mental health crisis, yet an entire group of qualified and dedicated professionals are being excluded from rendering much-needed care without Public Law 109-461 fully being enacted.

Example Public Law 109-461

Licensed professional counselors in the State of Ohio apply of mental health, psychological, and human development principles, through cognitive, affective, behavioral or systematic intervention strategies, that address wellness, personal growth, or career development, as well as pathology. I ask you to please support our veterans by demanding that the VA immediately give licensed counselors full and equal access to all mental health counseling positions at all VA facilities. This step will help to ensure that our veterans have the opportunity to receive mental health care from highly qualified professionals with excellent skills in crisis intervention, personal and social counseling, couple and family counseling and group counseling.

As a licensed professional counselor in the State of Ohio with a specialization in the treatment of chronic pain, I am saddened on a daily basis that I cannot provide assistance to our men and women in service who often present with this problem. Additionally, I have a long history of family and friends serving in the military and I am angered by the lack of mental health services at their disposal. Further, as a future counselor educator, I am already well aware of many students frustrated by their inability to counsel the population they have such a passion to serve upon graduation.

I am well aware of and truly respect your work to protect our service men and women over your seven terms in office. I believe you are in a truly unique position to appreciate what is at stake here for our nation's heroes and heroines. I urge you to fully enact the Veterans Benefits, Healthcare, and Information Technology Act, now Public Law 109-461. Can I count on your support? I look forward to hearing your answer. I thank you for taking the time to consider my opinion on this matter. I hope that my expressed concern will make a difference in your decision. If you need additional information, please contact me.

Sincerely,
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Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio 44221
330-555-5555 sburns1@something.com

References

- ⦿ <http://www.advocacyguru.com/>
- ⦿ <http://www.citizenredress.com/>
- ⦿ <http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/weekly/aa020199.htm>
- ⦿ <http://www.congress.org/congressorg/issues/basics/>
- ⦿ <http://www.cra.org/govaffairs/advocacy/writecong.html>
- ⦿ http://www.fcni.org/getin/resources/write_congress.htm
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