

SUICIDE PREVENTION COALITION OF COLORADO

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

The following toolkit is intended to help you become an effective advocate. Please contact us with any questions at info@suicidepreventioncolorado.org, or at 720-352-7505.

How to Communicate with Public Officials

When it comes to legislations and regulation, there is a fine line between having your views heard and having them ignored. Knowing how to communicate is vital in sending an effective message. Your first communication with a legislator should be an introduction only – to establish a primary relationship. It is not wise to present a legislator with your issue on your first meeting.

There are three principal ways to communicate effectively with your legislator or elected official.

- 1. Meet in person.**
- 2. Communicate by phone.**
- 3. Write a letter.** (Letters are the least effective way to communicate with and have an impact on your legislator. This is particularly true if they are not written by you.)

1. Communicate in Person

Attend Public Meetings: The easiest way to get to know your legislators is to attend public meetings. Many legislators hold meetings in libraries, at county fairs, or at pancake breakfasts. They consider this a good way to get to know the concerns of local citizens.

Make an Appointment: If you have a particular issue you would like to discuss with your legislator, make an appointment. These meetings are easier to get when the legislative session is not occurring, generally in summer and fall. You can also meet in groups. It is important to have a purpose and goal for the meeting.

2. Communicate by Phone

When telephoning a legislator or legislative staff:

- Identify yourself by name and profession as a constituent, if you live in district.
- Identify the bill by its number and sponsor.
- State your position on the legislation and how you would like your legislator to vote.
- Ask for the legislator's view – diplomacy will keep the door open for further contact.
- Ask that your message be relayed to the legislator, if you speak to staff.

The Legislative Hotline

There are toll-free Legislative Hotline numbers. These are a fast way to convey your view on a bill, with a free, easy phone call.

- For your Representative, call: 1-800-811-7647.
- For your Senator, call: 1-888-478-8136.

When you call, state your **name, address** and the **name of the representative or senator** you are calling. If you are not sure of his or her name, the hotline representative can tell you.

- **Identify the specific bill(s)** you are calling about **by number**.
- **State your position**, whether you support, oppose or have a combination of opinions.
- **Keep the message simple**.

The hotline is an answering service. If you wish to speak directly to a legislator, you must call his or her office. Hotline representatives cannot transfer your call. If the line is busy, keep trying.

3. Communicate in Writing

Letters are critical ways to reach your legislator. Any type of written correspondence is better than making no contact. Here are some suggestions:

- Write your letters on personal or business letterhead, with a return address on the letterhead and envelope.
- Identify the bill by its number and address only one issue per letter.
- Spell the legislator's name correctly and identify the bill correctly.
- Try to avoid form letters, when possible. Personalize a form letter if you choose to use one.
- Stress how a particular issue affects your legislator's district.
- Keep your letter to one page.
- Be clear and concise.
- Understand that your reader may not be familiar with the issue you are discussing and explain that which is necessary.
- Ask for a reply, indicating the legislator's response.

An effective letter will include:

- **Who you are** (I am a voter in your district and belong to a 350-member association of mental health professionals.)
- **What you want done** (I am writing to ask your support of HB ###.)
- **What the bill does for the district** (This bill will require that all mental health programs that serve teenagers...)
- **Who supports the bill** (The bill is supported by...)
- **What you want done again, in slightly different words** (Please make this possible by supporting HB ###...)
- **Your name, address and phone number** (Please feel free to contact me at...)

Legislative Meetings

Keep the following in mind when conducting meetings with legislators.

Find a small diverse group of people. Two to five persons should attend a meeting with a legislator or legislative staff. More than five persons may invite a speech rather than a dialogue. Try to include a representative cross section in the delegation, such as male and female, young and old.

Select a spokesperson and assign roles. Plan what each person will discuss in the meeting. Don't repeat information already provided by someone else. **Be direct, clear, and most importantly, be brief.**

Know your legislator's background on the particular issue. How has he or she voted on this or similar proposals? Stress the importance of this issue in the legislator's district. Try to anticipate the questions and be prepared with the answers.

If you don't know an answer, say so, and promise to find the answer and to get it quickly to the official asking the question. Immediately contact SPCC to pass along the question. Do not make up answers. One misstatement can destroy your credibility and the credibility of the organization.

Leave something tangible with the legislator, a business card, list of supporters, copy of the bill, a letter discussing your opposition or support for a bill – anything that will be a reminder of your visit and MHAC's position.

End your visit with a question. For example, "Can we count on your vote?" or "Can we send you more information?" Ask what the legislator's position or view is. If there is no position, volunteer to send more information and continue to lobby that individual through the use of phone calls, letters, and additional visits.

Follow up with a letter of thanks. Express your appreciation for the visit, summarize its purpose again, and repeat the position you would like the legislator to take.

After the meeting, hold a debriefing of the delegation. This will ensure that the group knows what was said, what was promised, and what the next step should be to secure the legislator's vote. Also, send the legislator a thank you note and include some additional information and documentation.

Summarize your conclusions and promptly report them to your Regional Liaison, Advocacy Committee members and to the SPCC Board of Directors.

Checklist for Legislative Meetings

Anticipate a number of questions when talking to public officials about specific legislation, for example:

- What problem is being addressed? Does a problem exist? If discussing a bill, know your legislator's role on the bill. Where is the bill in the legislative process?
- Does your legislator sit on a relevant committee? How can a legislator act on your behalf?
- What is the legislation's intent?
- How else can its goal be met? Are the bill's goals viable?
- Has this proposal come before the Legislature before? If so, when, why, and what was the outcome? Why is this bill different/the same?
- Who opposes/supports the legislation? Why?
- How does the political climate affect the bill? What is the likely public response? Why?
- How much will the legislation cost the state? Where will the money come from? Will this legislation save money?
- How many people would benefit/be harmed by the legislation?
- What are the local effects and tangible, positive outcomes that will result if the legislator votes as you recommend?
- Is this something positive to vote for (as opposed to fear of consequences)?

How You Can Be an Effective Grassroots Advocate

You can become an effective grassroots advocate with a few pointers.

- **Attend political education programs** to improve your political skills, sharpen your understanding of the issues, and learn the latest and most effective grassroots techniques.
- **Coordinate with the Advocacy Committee, Regional Liaisons and others in the state to develop a strategy** for approaching your lawmaker. You and your organization must work together to **deliver a consistent and credible message** on your issues.
- **Meet with your policymakers to introduce yourself.**
- **Meet regularly with policymakers** in the district, and the state capital to establish or maintain a close relationship and to present your views on issues.
- **Become acquainted with your lawmaker's staff or intern** in the district and the state capital, particularly those staff members who handle issues important to your interests.
- **Conduct facility/office tours** for your lawmakers and their staff.
- **Host volunteer fundraisers** for your federal and state policymakers.
- **Stay updated on key issues** on mental health and suicide prevention, and be prepared to discuss how they affect your work and your community.
- **Respond to requests** from your company, industry or profession to communicate with your lawmakers on specific issues before the state legislature.

Hosting a Site Visit for Your Legislator

Be prepared if a legislator schedules a site visit with your. Work carefully through the following details before the meeting:

Message: What is your message? What do you want the legislator to know when he/she is visiting? How are you going to ensure that message is conveyed?

Setting: What is the best time of day, location, are of the site to ensure your message is conveyed?

Messengers: Who should be involved from your organization? What programs should the legislator see? What activities are important? Do you need volunteers? Board members? Funders? Clients?

Materials: What should your legislator leave with? Annual report? Brochure? Fact sheet? Make sure you are ready ahead of time, with a folder that includes any information you'd like him/her to take and that includes a business card.

Five Rules for Effective Advocacy Encounters

Advocacy can be complicated. Professional advocacy requires a lot of experience and training. There are, however, some basic rules to follow to be an effective advocate.

1. **Advocacy Means Speaking Up:** Advocacy can include activities like organizing demonstrations or filing a lawsuit. But most advocacy means “speaking up.” Even if you are shy, you can speak up by putting the name of your program or issue in bold letters on the back of the folder you carry and facing it so everyone sees it. Or you can leave a handwritten note at your legislator’s office. Or you can call leave a voice mail on a machine. Or you can tell your story. The only thing you CAN’T do is not communicate. You can do whatever feels best for you as long as you

[WRITE, CALL or VISIT.](#)

2. **Think in terms of 51%:** Elected officials think in terms of 51%. They know they need 51% of their voters in their district to get them into office. They need 51% of their colleagues to get a bill moving. When approached with an idea, they wonder if it’s something that 51% of their voters, colleagues or legislators will go along with. Groups convey numbers. Even bigger numbers are conveyed when an issue is supported by a coalition – an organization of organizations.

3. **Always Keep Three Audiences in Mind:**

- **Elected officials and their staff**
- **Other voters**
- **Media**

Let your officials know how you feel, but one voice probably won’t sway an opinion. If there are enough voters who feel the same way you do and the official knows this, that can be persuasive. We must inform other voters as well as legislators.

4. **Be Sure They Hear You:** Elected officials will dominate a conversation if you allow them to. And sometimes when we’re around officials, we freeze up. Here are some techniques to bring you past the freezing point.

- **Bring something with you to explain** – a photo, a fact sheet – something you have to explain. That way you’ll talk and they’ll listen.
- **Memorize a 60-second elevator speech.** It should include your name, who you represent, that you live in district, any organization you represent, what you’re there for, and what you want them to do. Leave a fact sheet behind.

- **Invite your legislator to moderate a panel**, not to give a speech. When they are moderating, they have to listen and will hear others discuss the issue.
5. **Keep the Door Open for Next Time:** Some people will tell you not to worry about legislators who are your “friends” and not to waste time on your opponents. Just concentrate on the “swing” votes. NOT OK. Friends need to hear from us and we need to thank them for their support. You cannot predict how someone will vote. Finally, an opponent can become an ally, and vice versa. Never write anyone off.

Preparing a Fact Sheet

Fact sheets introduce you issue in a simple format. A good fact sheet says “Read Me.” Anything long and complicated may be ignored, or worse – counterproductive.

Fact sheets can:

- Identify your group or issue.
- List facts, statistics, issues, etc.
- Provide answers to common questions.
- Show information in charts, graphs, etc.
- Inform, persuade, educate.
- Make an argument for an issue.

Good Fact Sheets:

- Are 1 – 2 pages maximum.
- Use short bulleted statements.
- Are easy-to-read and direct the eye.
- Include compelling statistics and information.
- May make an argument for a specific audience.
- Use simple messages to explain complicated ideas.
- Understand the audience.

Fact Sheets Must:

- Be on letterhead or organization’s template.
- Contain basic contact information (name, website, email, phone number).

Developing Key Messages for Advocacy

Clear messages are important. They separate one organization from another, helping audiences to understand what differences groups have, what similarities they share, and what each organization stands for.

Key messages are brief (8-10 seconds), plainly understood, simply stated, and convey clear values and concerns. They are strategically and widely promoted.

Your key messages must convey:

- **Your current concern about an issue.**
- **Your values related to the issue.**
- **A clear call to action.**

For example:

Current concern: Homelessness is growing in our state.

Value statement: We believe every child deserves a place to call home.

Call to action: By working together to increase low-cost housing, we can prevent childhood homelessness.

Suicide Prevention Coalition of Colorado: Development of Legislative Agenda and Protocols for Action

SPCC will have a Legislative Agenda that advances mental health policy issues. This agenda will include top priority legislative items and legislative topics to monitor. The agenda will guide the activities of SPCC.

Process for developing SPCC Legislative Agenda:

Initial Process: The SPCC Board of Directors will review, discuss and decide on a legislative agenda in November of each year, during the board retreat.

Protocols for Change:

Primary Protocol: The SPCC Board of Directors will have the authority to make changes or additions to the SPCC Legislative Agenda at the monthly board meetings.

Urgent Protocol: If issues or bills of concern arise between meetings that were not considered in the original Legislative Agenda, the Advocacy Committee Co-Chairs, SPCC Board President and President Elect shall decide how to amend the agenda. If there is an issue about which these directors are unable to reach adequate consensus, or that requires additional information to make a more informed decision, they may choose to refer the issue to the Board of Directors for a decision. If time permits, and the four directors determine it is necessary, the President may call an emergency Board of Directors meeting.

If this urgent protocol is utilized, the Board of Directors shall be notified via email within one week and shall ratify any decisions at the next Board meeting.

Note: An active Advocacy Committee would allow a third protocol between the primary and urgent protocols, such as a secondary protocol. For example:

Secondary Protocol: If the issues or bills of concern arise between Board meetings, the Advocacy Committee shall meet and decide upon an addition or change to the Agenda for the specific issue or bill. The decision shall be ratified by the Board at the next regularly scheduled meeting, but action may begin based on the new agenda prior to the Board's next meeting.

Levels of Support for SPCC

Actively Support: Dedicate all lobbying and grassroots resources toward passage, including:

- Reviewing the bill and all amendments in detail.
- Developing fact sheet/position papers.
- Arranging for testimony.
- Working with sponsors, legislators and drafters on desired amendments.
- Coordinating with other supporting groups.
- Counting votes and lobbying for committee and floor passage.
- Sending action alerts to SPCC members requesting legislator contacts.
- Encouraging support by other public health constituencies.

Support: Review bill and amendments. Agree to allow SPCC name to be used as a supporter of the bill. May include writing letters to legislators, indicating SPCC support. Keep bill on SPCC's bill list. No additional resources to be utilized.

Actively Monitor: Review bill in detail. Monitor progress closely as bill moves through committees, including reviewing proposed and adopted amendments for possible impact on public health. May include working on amendments to bring the bill into one of the support categories above.

Monitor: Keep the bill on the SPCC bill list and track its progress.

Oppose: Review the bill and all amendments. Agree to allow SPCC name to be used in opposition of the bill. May include writing letters to legislators indicating SPCC opposition. No additional resources to be utilized.

Actively Oppose: Dedicate all lobbying and grassroots resources toward defeating the bill, including:

- Reviewing the bill and all amendments in detail.
- Developing fact sheets/policy statements.
- Arranging for testimony.
- Working with sponsors, legislators and drafters on desired amendments.
- Coordinating with other supporting groups.
- Counting votes and lobbying for committee and floor passage.
- Sending action alerts to SPCC members requesting legislator contacts.
- Encouraging support by other public health constituencies.
- May include working on amendments to bring the bill into one of the monitor or support categories.