



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION OF CONGREGATIONS

Washington Office for Advocacy

(202) 393-2255 • socialjustice@uua.org • uua.org/socialjustice

TIPS ON LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

“It is not yours alone to complete the work (of justice), but neither are you free to desist from it.” - Jewish teaching

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

The commitment required to be an effective advocate can be as short as a 1 minute phone call or as long as organizing a coalition visit to an elected official. Below are some tips on each of the most likely methods, organized from most effective to least effective.

By far, the most effective way to get your elected representative’s attention is a visit to their office. After a visit, writing letters and making telephone calls are the next most effective means of advocacy. Postcards, petitions, and emails (provided they include your name and address) have some impact, but considerably less. Online petitions can be good for raising awareness, but may be inaccurate and are usually not effective advocacy. Petitions forwarded by email are often outdated and/or wrong and should be avoided. Lastly, joining groups on Facebook may be fun but is unlikely to have any real impact.

Please remember to identify yourself as a Unitarian Universalist when communicating with Members of Congress and their staff. They are hearing from conservative religious activists all the time. They need to hear from the Religious Left a whole lot more!

Visiting Members of Congress

A face-to-face visit with an elected official, or their staff, is the most influential form of advocacy. This direct lobbying can be time-consuming, but it can also be fun, interesting, and rewarding. Elected officials, particularly on the federal level, have very demanding schedules. Don't be disappointed if you have to meet with a staff person—chances are good that they know more about the issue than the member anyway! Group visits are particularly effective, especially when different organizations or constituencies (such as religion, labor, and business) are represented. If you're determined to meet with your Member in person, a group visit increases your chances. For more information on how to prepare and conduct a visit, consult the “Tips on Visiting Members of Congress” section below.

Letters

Writing letters in your own words is an efficient and effective way to influence Members of Congress. Since congressional offices receive only a handful of letters on most issues, each carries real power. Identifying yourself as a person of faith makes your letter even more compelling! Please keep in mind that due to irradiation, it could take weeks, even months, for your letter to reach Congressional offices. Therefore, it’s best to fax your letter rather than using

conventional mail. For more information on how to write the most effective letter, consult the “Tips on Writing Members of Congress” section below.

Telephone Calls

Although not as effective as letters, telephone calls are very important—especially when the respective legislation is being debated or voted upon. A constituent will rarely get through to a member of Congress on the telephone, but talking to or leaving a message for the relevant staff person definitely has an impact. For more information on how to prepare and conduct a call, consult the “Tips on Calling Members of Congress” section below.

Petitions

It is precisely because petitions are easy to gather and circulate that they are not particularly influential. Taking the extra time and effort to write a letter is considerably better. The exception is if the petition (containing a lot of signatures) will be delivered **in person** to the elected official.

Postcards

Like petitions, due to their ease, postcards are not nearly as effective as letters in influencing legislators. However, like petitions, a large number of postcards hand-delivered to a member during a meeting can be very compelling.

Emails

Although few if any emails actually reach the Members themselves, most are seen or addressed by the staff in some way. Keep in mind that a faxed or mailed letter is much more effective than an email. If you are going to email—which is certainly better than nothing—be sure to include your home mailing address in your message, as it will be given much more weight.

Internet Petitions

Online petitions – whether via websites, emails, or social media sites - can be good for raising awareness about a subject, but are typically not effective advocacy. Where internet petitions are often most useful is in identifying people interested in a common cause and building excitement.

If you do sign an internet petition, make sure that the petition asks for your full address. Elected officials do not pay attention to signatures without street addresses. Also, make sure that the petition identifies the target and when the petition will be delivered. There is no point in signing a petition to the president if the president’s office is never going to receive it.

CALLING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Although not as effective as letters, telephone calls are very important—especially when the respective legislation is being debated or voted upon. A constituent will rarely get through to a member of Congress on the telephone, but talking to or leaving a message for the relevant staff person definitely has an impact. Remember to identify yourself as a Unitarian Universalist.

- 1) If you do not already know your Legislators (Senators and Representative), you can identify them by entering your zip code at www.congress.org/.
- 2) If possible, determine if your Legislator is on record supporting the issue in question. If they are, call to thank them for their support. (It is always good for them to hear positive feedback.) If they are not, call to urge that they support the bill. (See script below.)
- 3) Call your Legislator's Washington, DC office. The U.S. House of Representatives Switchboard is (202) 225-3121; the Senate is (202) 224-3121. Be prepared to ask for your Member's office by name. When you've reached the office, you can either (1) name the issue you're interested in and ask to speak to the staff-person who works on the issue; or (2) make your statement to the person who has answered the phone. The former is probably more effective; the latter more time-efficient.
- 4) After speaking, thank the person for their time and ask for their contact information to follow up with them.

Call Script

You: Hello, my name is __(your name)__. I'm a constituent from __(home town)__. Could I please speak to the Legislative Assistant who handles __(your issue)__?

Congressional Office Legislative Assistant: Hi, this is XXXX, how can I help you?

You: Hello, this is __(your name)__ from __(home town)__. As a citizen and a Unitarian Universalist, my values call me to support __(your issue)__. Therefore, I'm calling to ask that the Representative (or Senator) support _____. (If there is a specific bill number, reference it.)

Congressional Office Legislative Assistant: I will let the Congressman/woman know that we talked and make sure that he/she takes a look at the bill.

You: Thank you for your time. I hope that Rep. (or Sen.) XXXX will support this much needed legislation. Can I get your email so that I can follow up with you on this issue? Thanks again.

WRITING TO MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Writing letters in your own words is probably the most time-efficient and effective way to influence members of Congress.

They need to hear from you! They depend on you to educate them about what is happening in their district and what legislation is most important to their constituents. Writing a letter and making a follow-up phone call only takes a few minutes of your time, but it ensures that your representatives know how you want to be represented. A staff person reads every letter and many are also read by the Member. Since congressional offices receive only a handful of letters on most issues, each letter carries real power. Identifying yourself as a person of faith makes your letters even more compelling!

Letter-Writing Tips

Think about your letter as having three paragraphs, or parts. The opening part should clearly state your position and why you hold it. Urge the Member of Congress to take specific action (e.g. vote for/against a particular bill or amendment; co-sponsor a bill; etc.) The second part should give more information on the bill/action in question and evidence supporting your position. The third part should be a brief summary and provide final encouragement. When possible, somewhere in your letter you should also try to thank your Member for some action they've taken in the past.

1. Be personal.

A mailed or faxed handwritten letter receives much greater attention than a preprinted card or letter. A short story about your personal experience makes your letter more powerful.

2. State your request clearly and concisely.

Make a specific request. Keep your letter short and to the point.

“In order to protect the civil liberties of all Americans, please support S. 1552, "Protecting the Rights of Individuals Act" that will be offered by Senators Murkowski and Wyden.”

“Speak to key decision makers on the Senate HELP committee in support of fully funding Head Start programs.”

3. Make it real.

Provide some brief information (a story, a few statistics, etc.) to make the issue concrete and very real for your member of Congress. For example:

“Research from several countries reveals a lower reliance on abortion in areas where contraceptive use is higher—reflecting greater access to family planning services.”

“The World Health Organization recently estimated that some 70 percent of people in Africa co-infected with TB and AIDS do not even have access to the \$10 worth of anti-TB drugs needed for

a highly effective, low-cost strategy for curing TB called DOTS. This is not due to lack of infrastructure, but simply lack of funds to keep already existing programs running.”

4. Follow up.

Call your member of Congress’s office and ask to speak to the aide in charge of your issue. Mention your letter and repeat your request. Get a definite answer to your request (a yes or a no) or make plans to get a definite answer in the near future.

More Things to Keep in Mind

- One-page letters are ideal. Say what you need to say, but be as brief as possible.
- Keep your letter to one issue. A letter with a laundry list of issues has less impact than a letter on one topic.
- Make it legible and neat. Legible handwritten letters and well-typed letters are both effective.
- If you are writing about a specific bill, include the bill number. However, you can also write to state your position on an issue in general. Many members of Congress follow issues rather than bill numbers, and many important issues arise as amendments.
- Do not write nasty or insulting letters to your elected officials. It is not an effective means of persuasion.

Where to Send Your Letters

The Honorable ____
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable ____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

VISITING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Face-to-face visits with your elected officials (or their staff) are the most influential form of advocacy. This direct lobbying can be time-consuming, but it can also be fun, interesting, and highly motivating for those participate!

This guide will walk you the process of setting up a group lobby visit in your area. There are a number of times in a year when members of Congress leave Washington, DC, and return to their home districts/states for "Congressional Work Periods." These are usually around holidays, and are a great opportunity for effective advocacy.

Visit Overview

Relationships are key to effective advocacy and organizing, so we encourage you to view all interactions with Congressional offices as opportunities for building relationship. Ideally you want those offices to see you and your congregation (coalition, group, etc.) as a credible, powerful, and helpful voice for your issue. Your approach and behavior should move you towards these goals. Plan to focus on a single issue, and for a meeting that will last 15-45 minutes.

Set-Up and Planning

1. Assemble a Group

While it's certainly possible and effective to arrange a visit for a single individual, we recommend putting together a delegation. Group visits are more influential, and the experience will build relationships and skills among all participants. First, clearly identify the issue you'll be lobbying on (pick only one!!!) and the kind of delegation you seek. A good place to start is with members of your congregation. Interfaith groups and broader coalition delegations (business, secular non-profits, religious, etc) are also good options. Second, identify a rough timeframe for your visit and compile a list of all those who are potentially interested. This step is important because you may not get your first choice for a time to visit, so plan for some back and forth. Try to keep delegations fairly small, as in 3-5 people. Large delegations can be difficult to coordinate.

2. Schedule a Visit

Check your Member's website (see introduction for how to find it) for information on setting up a meeting—many offices require a written request. If you cannot find such info, call the office and ask to speak to the person in charge of scheduling. Identify yourself as a constituent and member of [name your congregation/coalition], and request a meeting with the Representative/Senator on [name your issue]. Setting up a visit often requires several follow-ups calls. Plan for the process to take 1-3 weeks.

3. Prepare for the Visit

- Research the official's record on the issue. Ideally you'll find something positive to thank them for that connects with the request you're about to make. The websites of groups that work on the issue may have information about their voting record. You can also visit your Congressperson's homepage to read their statements, press releases, and position papers.
- Once you know where the office stands, determine your ask and what arguments/materials best support you. A friendly office can be thanked for their leadership on the issue and asked to do more. An office on the fence can be educated about the issue with compelling personal stories. A hostile office can be reminded that they have constituents who hold contrary positions, and/or will be hurt by the policies (i.e., seek to put a human face on the issue). Your ask should be a specific action, such as voting for/against a certain bill.
- Identify your best arguments and assign each member of your delegation responsibility for covering one or more points. There are probably several organizations who work on your issue with helpful websites; try the UUA Washington Office's links page for starters. Learn about relevant legislation as well as effective arguments for your point of view. Familiarize yourself with the arguments of the "opposition" and be prepared to counter them. In an ideal world, the member will actually use some of your talking points in future communications about the issue!
 - Compelling personal stories will stick with people longer than facts—although you should also have some facts to help validate your stories.
 - Use religious language and arguments—speaking as a person of faith is often highly effective, especially on issues where officials probably hear a great deal from religious people with whom we disagree.
- Bring a packet of supporting materials to leave with the office. In some instances, a member may lack important details about the pros and cons of a particular matter. It is therefore helpful to share with the member information and examples that demonstrate clearly the impact or benefits associated with a particular issue or piece of legislation. Your information packet might include:
 - Information about your organization and contact information (most important!!!)
 - Letters or handouts from yourself or from supportive organization
 - Background information or polling
 - Personal stories
 - Other supporting information, such as local media coverage and newspaper editorials.

Conducting the Visit

- Dress neatly and conservatively. On groups visits, have a brief review and pep rally outside the office beforehand (perhaps also with a meditation or prayer).
- Remember that you're trying to build a relationship, so your disposition/approach should be polite and reasonable. Relax. Stick to your talking points and avoid speaking out of anger or frustration.
- Expect some introductions and pleasantries: who you are, where you're from, etc. One person (generally the person who set up the visit) should take the lead by introducing the group and the reason for the visit. For example: "Good Morning Senator Smith. Thanks for meeting with us. We're here from the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Cityville, with 250 members, to talk about the Marriage Amendment, S.J. Res. 1, and we'd like to introduce ourselves and say a little about why we feel strongly about this issue.")
- Have each person make their arguments and conclude with your ask. Use your stories and validate them with facts. Thank the official for something if at all possible. Be prepared for the questions and give-and-take of the visit; but always keep returning to your central message.
- A legislator may disagree strongly with your assumptions and with the goals you advocate. That's OK—don't be over-argumentative. If you don't know an answer, say so. If the Member or staffer asks you for information that you do not have, say that you do not have it but will get it in a few days. Never lie or make things up! Indeed, committing to get back to them gives you an opportunity to prove that you are credible and trustworthy.
- Press for a commitment. Will they support your position? If not, why not? When and how will they make a decision?
- End on a positive note. If you have found common ground, recognize where you disagree, but return to that "feel good" point. Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information, in the event the member expresses interest or asks questions.

After the Visit

- Debrief with your group. How did it go? Were participants happy with how they did? What arguments were most influential? What are the key factors in their decision-making, and what else can you do to influence them?
- Report how the visit went to others in the congregation or organizations (such as the UUA Washington Office!), especially if the visit is part of a larger effort.

- Follow up with the office by sending a thank you letter to the Member or staffer you met with, along with any additional information and materials you pledged to provide. Building a relationship with an office is the best way to make your voice heard on Capitol Hill. A meeting gets your foot in the door - it's in the follow-up that you're going to see results.
- Encourage others you know to do similar visits.

Appointment Request Template

[Your Address]

[Date]

The Honorable [full name]
U.S. Senate (or U.S. House of Representatives)
Washington, DC 20510 (20515 for House)

Dear Senator (or Representative) [last name]:

I am a member of the [UU Congregation, coalition, etc] in [your city], and we'd like to meet with you about [issue]. We are hoping that you might be available sometime in the [specify time and date range].

I can also be reached by phone at _____ or email at _____.

Thank you for considering our request to meet with you.

Sincerely,

HOSTING A LETTER-WRITING TABLE

By providing materials and a sample letter, one person can help influence many others to speak out on a current issue or piece of legislation. Even a few letters can have a big impact.

Officials assume that a single letter represents the views of several people; many letters represent the views of lots of people. Officials rarely have time to read letters. Letters generally are opened by staff, who keep running tallies of incoming letters and pass on mail counts to the official. A few sample letters may be selected for the official to see as a means of keeping a pulse on his or her constituency. Thought-provoking and informational letters can educate the staff who read them and thus influence the official indirectly.

Preparation

- Decide whether you will have one table where folks will write their letters or one table where folks can pick up all the information they need and move to empty tables nearby.
- Use a sample letter. Have a large copy taped to the wall or on an easel. Have several regular copies taped to the table or available for pick-up.
- Set up the table(s) in a visible, well-traveled area where there is plenty of space for folks to move around.
- Have an adequate numbers of chairs available. Provide ample numbers of pens, paper and envelopes, or postcards. If using just one table, provide clipboards for those standing.
- Have a list of the names and addresses of the officials to whom you are writing. If you are writing to the U.S. Senate, have both Senators' information available. If you are writing to members of the U.S. House of Representatives, be sure to have a way for folks to know the District in which they reside. Many churches have members and friends from more than one district.

During the Letter-Writing

- Be courteous, informative, and persuasive. Encourage folks to put the sample letter in their own words and to include personal experiences if possible.
- Assist those who may need help in composing their letters / postcards.
- If possible, stand up so that you are visible. If standing is not possible, wear a hat or sign that identifies you as the person in charge.
- Keep an eye open for folks who use a wheelchair. Invite them close to the table.

- Make your letter-writing table multigenerational! Bring crayons and colorful markers and ask kids to draw pictures that are relevant to the issue.
- Be sure that everyone includes their signature, printed name, and address. It is the only way that the intended recipient knows that the writer is a constituent.