



Guide for Members

Communicating with Your State Legislator

Legislatures are representative bodies that debate and negotiate the state laws that make an impact on how you fly. Your legislator represents you in that process and is one avenue you have of making sure your voice is heard and your opinion counts. Your input as a pilot and aviator is very important as legislators decide on issues and legislation affecting aviation regulations and your taxes.

State government today is considerably more complex than it was 200 years ago. State legislators receive a great deal of technical information from their staff, state agencies, and professional lobbyists. However! Most of their decisions depend on the views, interests and preferences of the citizens who live in their district. Lawmakers also receive a huge amount of phone calls and emails from their constituents. So how can pilots and aviators ensure that our individual voices stand out above the crowd?

Below are some tips AOPA suggests for pilots and aviators;

- **Know your legislator** – It's easy to find who represents you in your state government. You can check by using the search tool on your states' website, or you can use an online search engine like OpenStates.com. (http://openstates.org/find_your_legislator/)
- **Make sure your legislator knows you** – People are more likely to listen to a friend than a stranger. Legislators are the same way, the more familiar they are with you, the more likely your opinion will weigh on their decisions. One way to become more familiar is through regular cordial communication. It's especially helpful if you contact your legislator from time-to-time with a good word or some update on your business or personal ventures, rather than just contacting your legislator when you have troubles.

- **How to communicate with your legislator** – You may use a variety of communication methods to contact your legislator such as; phone calls, write a letter or email, or go visit them in person. Also consider giving testimony at public hearings held by the legislature.
 - **Phone calls** – Plan your call carefully, keep to the point and discuss only ONE issue per phone call. Organize your thoughts ahead of time and make notes to help you stay on track. Legislators may not have much time to talk so be brief, identify yourself and explain why you are calling. Lawmakers often use telephone statistics during debate, for example one might say, “I’ve received 100 phone calls supporting this bill today!”
 - **Write a Letter or email** – This is generally the preferred means of communication. When you write a letter, you provide a written documentation to which the legislator can refer as he or she tries to address your problem.

Be absolutely certain you spell your representative's name correctly and use the correct address or email address. If you don't, you could lose your audience. Always type a letter and give your address correctly so they can respond to your email or letter.

Don't write more than ONE page! Be brief and concise and only discuss ONE issue per letter. This allows your legislator to more easily present your ideas to other legislators.

It's easy to simply put several email addresses on one email but don't do this. Personalized emails and letters have a much bigger impact than a form letter which may end up in the 'spam' box.

- **Personal Visits** – You can visit with your representative face to face either in their office at the capitol, at their district office, or even closer to home like at a local coffee shop or public library. When planning to visit your representative, always call first to make an appointment.

As with phone calls and letters, keep your discussion brief and focus on ONE issue. It is a good idea to prepare a one-page fact sheet concerning your issue to give to your representative. This will help him or her better retain what you present. Have two copies, one to give, and one to help you stay focused in your conversation.

If the legislator is unavailable to meet with you but a staff person who handles the issue can meet instead, go for it. The staff person is often the one with the most knowledge on an issue and usually welcomes the input of constituents or experts on the issues. Staff members often make recommendations to the legislator. Winning over the staff member is one of the best ways to win over the elected official.

- **Giving Testimony** – If your representative gets to know you well enough, he or she may invite you to provide testimony on your issue at a committee hearing. However, as a resident of your

state, you may provide testimony with or without an invitation.

You may have to register with the clerk of the committee in order to be on the 'speakers list.' Make sure you arrive early so you can get a seat and stay for the entire meeting. Coming in late or leaving is usually frowned upon.

Prepare a one page sheet of bullet points you want to cover to help you be as specific and concise as possible. Don't write a lengthy speech and then read it to the committee members. Know exactly what needs to be said, and how you want to say it. Use personal or local experiences if applicable.

- **When to communicate with your legislator** – If you are working to build familiarity with your legislator regular notes to their office via the postal service or regular emails to their state email address is a good method. These regular notes can be as often as once a month but should be polite, cordial and short; as if you were writing to your neighbor.

If you are working to influence his/her decision on a particular issue that is important to you, you should communicate your opinion BEFORE any legislation is passed or any legislative action is taken.

- **What to say to your legislator** – Make sure your legislator knows exactly what is most important to you and why. Do not assume that a lawmaker has prior knowledge of an issue. Thousands of bills are introduced into state legislatures each year, so a legislator may not personally know about each one.

Tell your representative what impact you think a particular bill, if it becomes law, will have on you, your children, business, or community. Be concise, but specific.

You can always suggest a course of action that the legislator could take and be prepared to offer assistance in that course of action. If your legislator should choose another course of action that produces a desirable outcome, offer your assistance as well. It will be appreciated.