

Talking to Policymakers

Numbers numb, jargon jars and no one ever marched on Washington [or Lansing] because of a pie chart... Tell Stories *Andy Goodman*

Uneasy About Talking to Policy Makers? Remember This:

1. **They want to hear from us.** The only way that policy makers can understand the issues is if they hear about them from people they represent. They know that.
2. **We are all experts** in our own life experience. Are you thinking "... I'm just a parent... a volunteer... somebody who needs food..." In short, I'm no expert. Not true. No one knows what we know, or has had the same experiences that we have had.
3. **It's okay to not know every answer.** If you are asked a question that you can't answer, just say, "I don't know the answer to that, but I'll find out and get back to you."
4. **Real stories are critical.** Experts can be hired, real people, with real stories cannot. If you can tell your story in a short and compelling way, that may be the most important communication that your policy makers have on the issue.
5. **You are not alone.** There are groups out there who can give you updates on legislation, tips for a visit or call, and answers to your questions.

Two kinds of stories are needed:

1. Personal stories to get the listeners "hooked" so that they want to hear more.
2. Stories that illustrate the impact of an issue – what it means to a community

If you can come up with brief answers to these five questions, you are well on your way to coming up with a message that is short, clear and convincing.

1. WHO ARE YOU?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Name * Do you live in the policymaker's district? * Are you a member of an organization? * How many others are in your group?
2. WHAT IS YOUR ISSUE? <i>What do you care about? What makes you the most angry?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Pick one issue * Be prepared to describe your issue and don't be surprised if your legislator doesn't know anything about it * Be prepared to describe your issue clearly and plainly (no more than two or three sentences) – you can leave behind additional written material
3. WHY DO YOU CARE?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Why does this matter to you? To your organization? To your friends? To your family? To your community? * Why does it matter enough for you to take the time to talk to them about it? * How will it change your life and the lives of people you know? * Tell a personal story, a story from your heart – no one has ever been motivated by statistics alone
4. WHY SHOULD THEY CARE?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Why should your listener care? * What is happening because of the issue? * What is happening in their community? Schools? Neighborhoods?
5. WHAT DO YOU SPECIFICALLY WANT THEM TO DO ABOUT IT?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * If you can, have something specific in mind that you want them to do * If there is a bill, ask them to vote yes or no, if there is not a bill, be sure to tell them what you would want them to do with the issue * Sometimes the best action you can hope for is to talk with them again – ask them to read materials if you have them, and to expect a follow-up phone call from you.