

# Ways to Connect with your Legislator

If legislators do not hear from their constituents on an issue, it does not exist in their minds.

**Our collective success depends on you as families getting to know your own representative and senator. They love to hear from THE PEOPLE WHO VOTE FOR THEM.**

1. Find out when your legislator holds local district office hours. Show up and explain that you are a parent of a child with a disability and you want to introduce yourself.
2. Get to know the staff. They handle all the nitty-gritty budget issues that drive our train.
3. Call your legislator at the State House. It is unlikely that he will answer the phone but speak to his aide. Tell him that you have a child with a disability and would like to be kept informed on disability issues.
4. Write a letter, tell your story. Your personal story is critical to us accomplishing our mission. If legislators do not hear from their own constituents, they feel our issues are not important.



Image: Larry Espling with Sen. Berry

5. Send an email. Staff read their email as soon as they go into the office in the morning. Email addresses are on the attached list of legislators.
6. Visit your legislator in the State House. If he/she is not in, introduce yourself to the staff. Write a note stating that you stopped by to visit. Room numbers are in the packets.
7. Testify on a bill that is important to you; ask your legislator to join you.
8. Write a letter to the editor in the local paper on an issue that is important to you. Believe me, your legislator will read it.

9. Consider attending a Citizens' Legislative Seminar, sponsored the Senate President's Office. You must be nominated by your own representative or senator.
10. Attend a fundraiser in the district. Most local fundraisers are in the \$25.00 range. They're fun and a great way to meet some neighbors. Your legislator will appreciate your showing up.
11. Call the campaign office during election season and ask to volunteer. Believe me, campaigns are hard work. Your legislator will remember you forever.
12. Hold a sign at the polls on Election Day. If you can give two hours, you will have a friend for life. It's fun and you will meet new people.
13. Ask your legislator to meet with a group of constituents at your home to discuss a specific issue. This works beautifully during election season. Don't be afraid. Legislators are standing outside of supermarkets to be seen. They're happy to be in your home when they are looking for votes.
14. Host a Legislative Breakfast in the district. Don't panic. You don't do this by yourself. This is a task for your local parent group, etc.
15. Join the local Democratic or Republican Town Committee or Ward Committee. Some are amazing and you'll be sitting next rising political star in no time.
16. Host a meet and greet in your home for a favorite legislator so he can meet your neighbors. Legislators love these because they get to know people in their district.
17. Invite your legislators to your organization's annual meeting or awards ceremony. If they cannot come, at least they will know you invited them.
18. Give your legislator an award at your annual meeting, but only if he deserves it. If your legislator simply shows up but has not been particularly helpful, do not feel compelled to give him an award. Recognize his presence and thank him for being there.
19. Rallies are useful when something extraordinary has happened -- budgets have been cut, something you completely disagree with is taking place. For example, an institution is opened, and a nursing home is warehousing people. We don't do rallies lightly. Work with other groups and try to get out as many people as possible.

20. Petitions are a lot of work and not terribly effective unless you have huge amounts of resources. Collecting names without stories is not that effective.
21. Always give back. If a legislator is good to you, help her on her re-election campaign, write a thank you note, send a card during the holidays, **always say thank you.**
22. When in doubt, consider running for office or think of someone who would represent your issues. Don't let someone you disagree with walk away with the seat. The stakes are too high for us and our families.

# TIPS FOR CALLING YOUR LEGISLATOR

## WHEN TO CALL:

Usually when there is an action (e.g. a vote on the budget is being heard) pending in the near or very near future.

## HOW TO CALL:

### **TRY TO SPEAK DIRECTLY WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR OR ASK TO SPEAK WITH A LEGISLATIVE AIDE.**

You can contact your legislator at his/her State House office. Call the Massachusetts Legislature's main number (617) 722-2000 if you don't know your Representative's or Senator's direct phone number. If you are unable to speak to either your legislator and/or aide, always leave a specific message with your name, number, where you are from, why you are calling, and ask to be called back.

## WHAT TO SAY:

### **1. IDENTIFY WHO YOU ARE, WHERE YOU ARE CALLING FROM, AND IN WHAT CAPACITY.**

State whether you are a constituent, agency Executive Director, board member, teacher, parent or any combination thereof. Be sure to identify if you are part of a larger network of people in the district – and/or throughout the state. (e.g. United Way of Mass Bay or Arc affiliate) Never forget to give your name, address, and phone number at the beginning or end of the conversation.

### **2. STATE WHAT YOU ARE CALLING ABOUT.**

Name the specific bill, budget item or issue you are calling about. When

possible, know as much about the bill title, where it is in the legislative process and what action is pending (i.e. "currently in the Education Committee," "coming up for a vote on the floor of the House today," or "will be voted on next week.") Although it is not necessary and often not needed, it may help to orient your legislator and/or aide to that particular bill and whether action is a clear priority.

### **3. STATE WHAT YOU WANT.**

Request that a legislator take a specific action (i.e. "move a bill out of committee" or "vote for or against a bill"). Be sure to thank your legislator if he/she is a sponsor or co- sponsor of the bill you are calling about – but still ask him/her to take specific action.

### **4. TELL YOUR LEGISLATOR WHY YOU WANT IT.**

Speak from your own experience, beliefs, and convictions! Use a compelling statistic to bolster your case. Share a "real life" story about how this issue will or has affected you or others and state how this proposal could either help or hurt. The more personal you can be, the more impact you will have. If you can, make your case from a "local" point of view and present as specific a picture as possible of how your issue affects people in your legislator's district. **Ask about his/her stand on the issue.**

### **5. ASK ABOUT HIS/HER STAND OR OPINION ON THE ISSUE.**

### **6. THANK THEM FOR THEIR TIME AND EXPRESS YOUR APPRECIATION IF THEY ARE SUPPORTING YOUR ISSUE!**

If your legislators' positions do not agree with yours or if they are undecided, you may want to politely inquire about their concerns – but always ask if there is any additional information you could provide them. If the decision will affect an organization or group that you belong to or work with, you may want to invite your legislators for a visit. This is often an opportunity to create a more powerful impact, as "seeing is believing." After the visit, be sure to thank them and ask them to let you know when they expect to make their decision on how they will vote.

**7. FINALLY, TRY TO KEEP THE PHONE CALL SHORT AND COURTEOUS!**

Unless, of course, they're keeping you on the phone with questions.

**Want to get involved in HDSA advocacy efforts  
in MA? Contact Kathy Hackett, MA chapter  
president at [kathleen.hackett3@verizon.net](mailto:kathleen.hackett3@verizon.net)**

