How to Communicate With Your Legislator

Legislators have the power to bring about change, but first they must be convinced that the change is necessary and that it makes sense. You can do this by sharing your story with them. Hearing individuals’ stories is much more powerful than hearing general facts, and the more people they hear from, the better.

Hearing your stories is what will convince them that there is 1) a major issue that impacts families across Tennessee, 2) there is a viable solution for Tennessee, and 3) there is something they can do.

Telling them about the problem is only part of the story. They also need to hear that there is something they can do to fix it. Show them that there are solutions, such as the Katie Beckett waiver or the TEFRA option, that can help you and other families like you. Make sure to tell them what these programs do, that these programs are already working in other states, and that they make sense, economically and morally.

Finally, sharing your stories is very important because you are building a relationship with your legislator. It is easier for a legislator to care about an issue if they feel a connection with the people who the issue affects. Making the effort to talk your legislator in person is also helpful.

If you have the opportunity to go to an event where your legislator will be present, take advantage of it and try to introduce yourself and your child to them. Remember, not everyone has had the opportunity to get to know a child with special needs. Putting a face to the issue makes it even more meaningful!

Legislators are public servants. They hold office because their constituents, people like you, voted for them. Because of that, the issues that affect you are important to them and they want to help you! They just need to know how.

How to find your Legislator:

Contact information for legislators can be found at the following websites:
- http://www.capitol.tn.gov/legislators/
- http://www.capitol.tn.gov/house/members/
- http://www.capitol.tn.gov/senate/members/

How to Write to Your Legislator

Purpose:

At this point, the focus of your letter should be to tell your story, as a way to demonstrate how Tennessee’s working families of children with disabilities are being affected by not having access to TennCare. The other purpose is to ask them to help give families like yours more ways to get TennCare through the Katie Beckett waiver or TEFRA option.

Writing Letters to Legislators:

Letters sent through the mail are more effective and are preferred to emails or faxed letters. Personal letters have more impact than form letters. If you have your personal stationary or letterhead for your organization, use it! Including photographs of your child and family is great too.

What to write:

Be polite, informative, and to the point. Describe your story in your own words and use examples to help support your message. Typed, one-page letters are best. A helpful guideline is the following three-paragraph structure, or you could use the letter template to guide you.
Paragraph 1: What is the issue you are writing about? Say why you are writing and who you are (parent, advocate, and any “credentials”). Don’t forget to include your name and address, even when using email.

Paragraph 2: Provide more detail and tell your story. Be factual, not just emotional. Give information and provide examples of how not having TennCare affects your family and others.

Paragraph 3: Close by telling them that there is a solution to this problem and that it involves existing policy choices that are working in other states. Again, tell them that you want Tennessee to expand TennCare for children with disabilities from working families or that you want Tennessee to offer the Katie Beckett waiver or the TEFRA option.

Letter Do’s and Don’ts

Do:
- Do keep it short and simple- one page is best.
- Do be courteous and respectful.
- Do say who you are. Anonymous letters go nowhere.
- Do include your correct name, address (even in an email), phone number and email address. If you don’t include at least your name and address, you will not get a response.
- Do state any professional credentials or personal experience you may have, especially those pertaining to the subject. If you are a parent or caregiver of a child with special health care needs, let them know.
- Do use specific examples or evidence to support your position.
- Do say what it is you want done or recommend a course of action.
- Do thank the member for taking the time to read your letter.

Don’t:
- Don’t “gush.”
- Don’t feel that you need to remind them that you are a taxpayer or that you voted for them or did not vote for them.
- Don’t demand a response.
- Don’t forget to include how this affects you and your family personally and don’t overwhelm them with jargon and numbers.
- Don’t make demands or let your passion get in the way of making your point.
- Don’t use insults or try to cast blame or make accusations.
- Don’t apologize for taking his or her time.

How to Talk to Your Legislator

Some of this information was shared by the TN Health Care Campaign and the League of Women Voters

Personal Visit
The personal visit is the most effective method of sharing your message. In doing so, you will have established yourself as a concerned constituent. If your legislator is holding a hearing or workshop, try to attend. It is a good time to meet your legislator informally.

Calling
The telephone can be an effective tool. Remind the legislator of any previous contact. If the member is not available, speak with the legislative assistant.

Meeting/ Talking with your Legislator

1. Preparation
- Know what you are lobbying for and why
• Know yourself  
• Know your legislator

2. Introduction
• Introduce yourself, including giving your full address if you are a constituent. You may also want to give a very brief description of what your job is or what organizations you work with that give you special knowledge on the issue.
• Identify yourself as a constituent, a supporter (if applicable)

3. Make Your Case
• Explain what the issue is and why you care about it. Tell a story.
• Distribute relevant materials before you leave.
• Follow up with representatives, especially those who were undecided or needed more information.
• Write and mail “thank you” note after the meeting.

Meeting/ Talking Do’s and Don’ts

Do:
• Address your Senator or Representative properly.
• Identify yourself immediately at each contact.
• Use your own words.
• Be brief and explicit, courteous and reasonable.
• Give legislators succinct, easy to read literature; highlight important facts and arguments.
• Get to know legislative staff and treat them courteously.
• Always keep off-the-record comments confidential.
• Write to say you approve, not just to criticize or oppose.
• Keep the door open for further discussion in spite of any negative attitudes.

Don’t
• Don't apologize for taking his or her time. If you are brief and to the point, s/he will be glad to hear from you.
• Don't be arrogant, condescending or threatening toward legislators or their staff.
• Don't argue or back recalcitrant legislators into a corner if they take a definite position against you.

Remember:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead