

Public Policy Communication 101

Effective Communication with your elected official

To be an effective mental health advocate, you must learn how to communicate effectively. Advocacy, put simply is communicating ideas to people. Here are three basic principles of effective communication to keep in mind when contacting elected officials:

Principle 1: 93 percent of all communication is nonverbal.

When people communicate, they use more than just their words; one uses tone of voice, facial expressions, hand gestures, and body language. Reading the cues allows you to interpret how the discussion is going. It is also more likely that after you establish a personal connection, elected officials will be more responsive to you.

Principle 2: Correct information establishes credibility.

What one communicates is as important as how one communicates. To be an effective advocate, one must prove that the issue is legitimate with data and facts. If the information is questionable or misconstrued, then the advocate will lose credibility and persuasive power. If the elected official asks a question that you are not able to answer with a credible and correct response, it is very appropriate and important to ask for time to get the information.

Principle 3: Being clear and consistent is vital.

Repetition is key for absorbing new ideas and facts. Repetition is key for absorbing new ideas and facts. Your efforts must be consistent. This helps establish credible sources of information to the elected officials, media, and the general public. Make sure you understand the issue and are able to articulate why you are bringing it forward.

❖ The worst communication is **NONE AT ALL.**

Putting Principles into Practice: Communicating with Elected Officials

The best way to communicate with your elected official is ***in person***. If this isn't possible, telephoning is the next best way, as it is personal. Letters and emails are only effective if they are personal, usually handwritten (if your handwriting is legible), or if you have previously established a relationship with the elected official. Some elected officials prefer email to letters, and some don't have email at all. Feel free to call their staff to find out what they prefer (their staff is aware of what works best to get a particular elected officials interest and attention!)

1. Telling Your Story

One of the most influential actions any individual can take is to tell one's story. Personalizing an issue allows elected officials to relate to you and remember your issue. Telling your story is no small thing; recounting to strangers some of the most intimate and personal things about your life

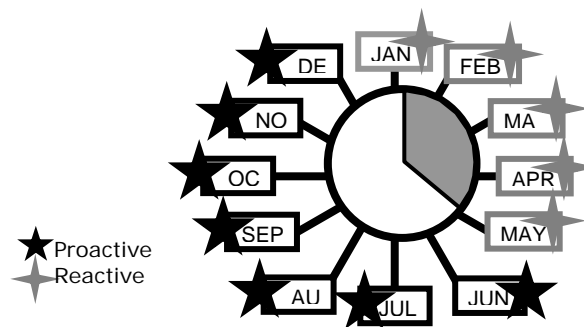
can be very daunting. Telling your story can take many formats, and a common structure is, “I used to be like *this*, then I did that or something happened to me, and today I am like *this*.” Include powerful visual images and specific details of your story to catch your audience, sweep them up and engage their imagination. Usually the things that stand out in your mind are the things that will capture your audience.

The story must closely relate to the issue being discussed which is the heart of the discussion. Does it emphasize the importance of a treatment or funding? Does your story show that a particular policy will or will not work in specific applications? You usually have a limited amount of time to speak and it’s important that you have a least an outline and rehearse your story. Knowing your point will help keep your story on track.

Most importantly, it all has to be true. Only tell stories you have practiced on personal subjects you are ready to talk about; you probably want to skip the parts that cause you to be overly emotional. (You don’t want to break down and be unable to continue, or embarrass your audience.) Remember, this is YOUR story, YOUR experience and YOUR expertise.

2. Off Session

It is important to begin building relationships with elected officials out of session (June to December) to start dialogue about mental health and substance abuse issues, when elected officials are more accessible. As you see in the figure on the right, these relationships are built and maintained during the summer and fall (proactive).



After developing the relationships off session, one can engage elected officials again during session, January to May (reactive). The proactive off-session strategy makes the advocacy during session much more effective.

Meetings

To set up a meeting:

- Many state officials don’t have staff, so you may set up the appointment with the official him/herself and be prepared to offer a few different meeting times
- Identify yourself as a constituent and the purpose of the meeting
- After the call, email or mail a confirmation of the appointment; include your contact information in case the appointment needs to be changed.
- Think of the first meeting as a “get-to-know-you” session

Before the meeting:

- Research the official's background and career; what committees does (s)he serve on, what legislation has the elected official worked on in the past, and how did the elected official vote on behavioral health issues.
- Outline the points you would like to make and the commitments you want from the official. You should not plan for more than one major talking point and two minor talking points.
- Practice telling your personal story, keeping it short and to the point; elected officials will remember your facts if they can remember you personally.
- Gather research documents and information that support your points. You should have copies of important research for the meeting.
- Research the opposing views and be ready to answer any questions.

During the meeting

- Be flexible - do not expect the meeting to be longer than a half of an hour.
- Extend the usual courtesies: be on time for your appointment, dress appropriately, and address them as "Senator" or "Representative."
- Since you have limited time, remember your purpose and avoid getting sidetracked. Some common discussion items:
 - Thank them for the good work they have done.
 - Share your values, what you do for a living, community activities, etc.
 - Refer to specific legislation by name and number, and know its current status.
 - It is appropriate to ask the elected official to support, oppose or amend legislation.
- If you are asked a question you cannot answer reply, "I don't know, but I will get back to you."
- Keep in mind that these meetings should be a dialogue. Listen to the elected official's opinions and viewpoints.
- Even though mental health and substance abuse is a personal issue for you, it may not be to your elected official. Be aware of your language and tone.
- If you are meeting at the Capitol, it is illegal and inappropriate to mention campaigns or give your elected official campaign donations. It is also inappropriate to threaten the official by withholding your support; the purpose of the meeting is gain an ally.
- Before you leave review your notes to be sure you covered all your issues and have a clear answer on any commitments from the elected official.
- Thank the elected official and staff when you leave.

After the meeting

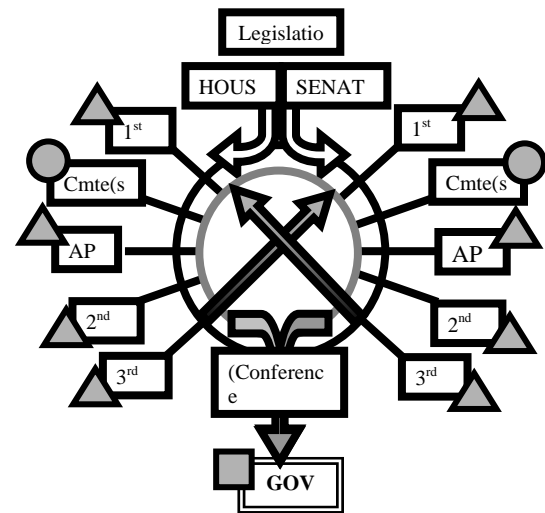
- Follow up the meeting with a short letter or email to the elected official to thank them for the meeting; and to briefly review the points you made and answer the questions you couldn't in the meeting.
- After you have established a relationship, you can meet with your elected official before the session begins to discuss issues the elected official will be working on.

Group Meetings

Group meetings require more planning, since you must have a consistent group message. It is very important to meet with the group before the meeting and clearly outline the points the group wants to make, and who will speak to each point.

3. In Session

MHAC is very active during the Legislative Session, and often we are advocating for legislation we helped to create. Approximately 800 pieces of legislation are considered each session. Elected officials have a difficult time keeping track of all the issues, and often consult their constituents. The triangles and square in Figure 5 indicate when “Take Action Alerts” may ask you to contact elected officials on specific pieces of legislation. The two circles are times when MHAC may need qualified community members to testify at a committee hearing.



At every stage of the process, advocates can contact their elected officials about legislation. Since relationships were built before the session, elected officials will be more responsive to you and often be more willing to listen to your thoughts on mental health and substance abuse policy.

4. Use the information from MHAC’s Weekly Legislative Updates

Use good information. In order to expedite and streamline the communication process, MHAC sends out weekly legislative updates to provide consistent messages and information in order to speak with one voice. Specifically, MHAC uses Policy Updates and Take Action Alerts to inform constituents.

Policy Updates

These informational bulletins are emailed to constituents about activities in the Legislature, government departments and agencies and other community activities. During the legislative session, the weekly Legislative Update includes a chart of bills MHAC has taken positions on and summaries of each of those bills.

Take Action Alerts

An alert is a call for specific action, usually contacting your elected officials or attending a community event. The Alerts guide you by always including the following points:

- The number, title, and the sponsors of the bill;
- The position MHAC has taken and supporting facts;

- Clear direction for the elected officials (e.g. “Please vote in favor of this bill without amendments);
- Time frame of the action.

MHAC emails Take Action Alerts when contacts will be most effective, so it is crucial for you to act quickly to be successful during session. Take Action Alerts are designed to give you information and facts for you to personalize. During session, the contact will be much quicker and simplified, but the same rules apply as when you meet with an elected official.

These points and letters should always be **personalized**. Because the legislative process is time sensitive and government bureaucracies work in specific time frames, it is important to **immediately take action**.

