

Legislative Handbook



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Introduction

A key role of The New York State Volunteer Ambulance and Rescue Association is to educate the Senators and Assemblyman of New York State about the priorities, interests, and needs of our members. With that understanding our representatives in the New York State Legislature can then promulgate laws and regulations that support and enhance the lifesaving services that we provide to our communities.

There are different levels of government in New York State

- Local government, comprised of villages, towns, and counties.
- State government, comprised of the Senate, Assembly, and governor.
- Federal government, comprised of the Senate, House of Representatives, and president.

While the Association has a Committee for Legislative and Regulatory Affairs that does undertake educational activities, it is also important for each member and district of the Association to communicate with their local representatives. The purpose of this document is to provide a resource for members and districts to interact with their representatives in all levels of government.

Credit is due to Michael Wilhem for developing the first version of this document, upon which most of this material is based.



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Effective Communication With Elected Representatives

Do's

Identify clearly the subject or subjects in which you are interested, not just bill numbers.

- State why you are concerned about an issue or issues. Sharing your own personal experience, particularly as a member of the prehospital community, is excellent supporting evidence. Explain how you think an issue will affect patients, the prehospital profession, your community or family.
- Restrict yourself to one, or at most, two topics.
- Put thoughts in your own words. If an elected representative receives numerous letters with nearly identical wording, he or she may discount them as part of an organized pressure campaign.
- Try to establish an ongoing relationship with your elected representatives, which will give you more influence as a constituent.
- Get involved early in the legislative process by communicating while legislation is being considered by committees, as well as when it is being considered by the elected body.
- Find out the committees and subcommittees on which your elected representatives serve.

Do NOT's

- Don't ever threaten. Don't hint "I'll never vote for you unless you do what I want." Present the best arguments in favor of your position and ask for their consideration in a respectful manner.
- Don't pretend to wield vast political influence. Contact your elected representative as a constituent, not a self-appointed spokesperson for the pre-hospital community.
- Don't use trite phrases or clichés. They can make your letter sound mass produced when it isn't. Just be yourself.
- Don't ever link campaign contributions to legislative support.



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Writing to Elected Representatives

Identify Yourself as a Constituent

Put your name and complete address on both the envelope and the letter. Elected representatives will only feel compelled to respond to constituent mail, so it's important to establish immediately that you live in the district.

Use Proper Forms of Address

Address your lawmaker as "The Honorable." Also, be sure to get their title correct, e.g. Senator, Representative, Assembly member. Use "The Honorable" in the address and the office title in the salutation (Dear Senator Smith). Courtesy is important and will make the legislator or staff more receptive to your message.

Be Brief and Simple

Address only one issue in each letter; and, if possible, keep your letter to no more than two pages. Try to stay on one page. In the first paragraph, state your purpose and what you want. Avoid the temptation to be comprehensive in explaining the legislation and making all possible arguments.

State (and Repeat) Your Position

Make your position and/or request clear in both your opening and closing paragraphs. Be specific. State what action you want. If you want to advance a piece of legislation, say so. If you want to know the legislator's stand on an issue, ask what it is. If you want support on a particular issue, request it and a response.

Refer to Applicable Bills

Elected representatives are not familiar with every bill that has been submitted during the legislative session. If the topic of your letter relates to a proposed piece of legislation include the bill number(s) in your letter.

Personalize Your Message

This is one of the most important things you can do to ensure your letter makes an impact. Many people are uncomfortable sharing their feelings or talking about their own experiences, or believe that such information is inappropriate to the legislative process. Yet, it is this information that separates one's message from the standardized, bulk messages drafted by interest groups. While form letters, postcards, and petitions are read and counted, they don't carry the weight of a personalized, individual letter. Persuasive constituent mail humanizes issues by placing them in a local, personal context. These messages are more likely to be read than simply tallied.

Be Polite and Avoid Ultimatums or Rudeness

Everyone responds better to praise than criticism. Threats and ultimatums do little to convince a legislator to adopt your position. And, if a legislator does take the course of action that you suggest, send them a note of thanks. This will only help build your long-term relationship with the legislator and staff.

Do Not Enclose Additional Material

Additional reports or newspaper articles are rarely read or filed. If you have a particularly useful resource, mention it in your letter and offer to provide a copy upon request. Overwhelming an office with paper runs the risk of your letter being discarded along with the offending pile of paper.

Do Not Exaggerate or Lie

Stick to your facts and experiences. Stories or facts fabricated to prove your point only run the risk of undermining your credibility. Many legislators and staff become adept at spotting a tall tale.

Make Your Message Timely

Don't procrastinate. Your letter is not helpful if it arrives after a vote. Be aware of the legislative process (is the bill in committee or coming up for a vote on the floor) and time your letter accordingly. Faxes can allow you to get your letter to a legislator at critical junctures in the process.

Send a Copy of Your Letter to NYSVARA

Knowing that you've contacted a legislator helps your national and/or local organization staff coordinate legislative strategy and additional lobbying. Also, send them a copy of any response you receive.



Electronic Mail Correspondence with Elected Representatives

Electronic mail is a relatively new and still-evolving means of communication. Its very nature makes it much more convenient and efficient than traditional written communication. Those same characteristics yield potential weaknesses and hazards as well.

Follow all of the Guidelines for Written Communication

Email is merely another mode of communication; the rules of communicating with elected representatives remain the same.

Put Your Name and Address at the Top of the Message

Representatives and their staffs need to immediately recognize that this message is coming from a resident of their district, a constituent. Electronic mail programs do not typically format a message in this manner; be sure to do so yourself.

Be Brief

A sheet of paper provides a good measure for the length of a written letter; it is much easier to become long-winded in an email.

Avoid Attachments

Legislative offices rarely take the time to print or read attachments to email. Offer to provide supporting documents on request, but avoid sending attached files.

Do Not Become Spam

Do not send elected representatives a message every single day – about the same issue or various issues. An office that receives numerous messages from a single person quickly loses sight of the urgency or expertise that constituent can bring to a specific issue.

Don't "cc" Everybody

Resist the urge to send a copy of your message to every member of Congress. You will persuade no one and annoy everybody. A legislative office wants to know that you have appealed to them for specific action, not just sent them a copy of a memo distributed to all.

Maintain Your Decorum

People have a tendency to be more casual and informal when writing an email. Remember that you are writing to an official of our government and use the same level of formality that you would in a paper letter. If you have strong feelings about the topic of the email consider waiting 24 hours and re-reading it before sending, or even have someone else read it before sending it.

Proofread your Email

Too often the speed and ease of sending e-mail is reflected in poor grammar and sloppy spelling. Even if a staffer is able to determine your meaning, such errors reflect badly on your overall argument. Take a break before you press "send," and proof your message.



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Telephone Correspondence with Elected Representatives

Phone calls can be an effective way to make your views are known to a member of Assembly or Senate, although often times you will speak with the staff, which can be as effective as speaking with the representative themselves. Phone calls can also be used to learn where a member of the Assembly or Senate stands on an issue, which you can then incorporate into a follow-up letter. Phone calls are very effective when time is of the essence, such as in the days or hours leading up to important votes.

Be sure to have all the information pertaining to the issue you are calling about researched and on hand since many questions will be asked about the topic you are calling about. Chances are good that the staff person on the other end will specialize in the issue you are calling about. And remember, "I don't know," is a very acceptable response, especially when followed by, "but I will be sure to get back to you." Just be sure to follow up as they will be expecting a return phone call with an answer.

Feel free to contact the NYSVARA at 1-877-NYSVARA for any information that you are not sure about before or after your scheduled call.



Meeting with Elected Representatives

Meeting with an elected representative is a very effective way to convey a message about a specific issue or legislative matter. Below are some suggestions to consider when planning a visit to a congressional office.

Plan Your Visit Carefully

Be clear about what it is you want to achieve. Determine in advance which member or committee staff you need to meet with to achieve your purpose.

Make an Appointment

When attempting to meet with a member, contact the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler. Explain your purpose and who you represent. It is easier for the staff to arrange a meeting if they know what you wish to discuss and your relationship to the area or interests represented by the member.

Be Prompt and Patient

When it is time to meet with a member, be punctual and be patient, in fact, be about 10 minutes early. It is not uncommon for a Representative to be late or to have a meeting interrupted due to the member's crowded schedule. If interruptions do occur, be flexible. When the opportunity presents itself, continue your meeting with a member's staff.

Be Prepared

Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials supporting your position, often available from the NYSVARA. Members are required to take positions on many different issues. In some instances, a member may lack important details about the pros and cons of a particular matter. It is therefore helpful to share with the member information and examples that demonstrate clearly the impact or benefits associated with a particular issue or piece of legislation.

Be Political

Elected representatives want to represent the best interests of their constituents. Whenever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the member's constituency. If possible, describe for the member how you or your group can be of assistance to him/her. When it is appropriate, ask for a commitment.

Be Responsive

Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information in the event the member expresses interest or asks questions. Follow up the meeting with a thank-you letter that outlines the different points covered during the meeting, and send along any additional information and materials requested.

Update the NYSVARA

After your visit with your elected official, take the opportunity to also update the NYSVARA, your local district, and/or your squad. Sharing your experience not only offers the NYSVARA good feedback for future NYSVARA member outreach, but also enhances their ability to help support that issue. With your help, the NYSVARA can more effectively advocate on behalf of its members.



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Resources

New York State Department of State Handbook
<http://www.dos.state.ny.us/lgss/pdfs/handbook.pdf>

This document describes how local and state governments are organized and operate in New York.

New York State Assembly Web Site
<http://www.assembly.state.ny.us/>

This site includes Assembly Member Directory, Bill Search & Legislative Information, Press Releases, and Legislative Reports.

New York State Senate Web Site
<http://www.nysenate.gov/>

This site includes Senator Directory, Session Calendars and Committee Schedules, Bills and Laws, Press Releases, and Senate Reports.

New York State Legislature Legislative Session Information
<http://public.leginfo.state.ny.us/menuf.cgi>

This includes: Bill Text, Status, Summaries, Sponsor Memos, Floor Votes; and tools to search NYS Legislative Bills, NYS Legislative Resolutions, and Laws of New York.

NYSVARA's Legislative Agenda
<http://www.nysvara.org/ourAgenda.html>



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Address and Contact Information

New York State Capitol
State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12247

New York State Legislative Office Building
Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY 12248

NYSVARA Committee for Legislative and Regulatory Affairs
NYSVARA
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