

Advocacy in the Illinois General Assembly

The Illinois Occupational Therapy Association follows dozens of bills every year that may impact how you practice your profession. While the ILOTA has a lobbyist to follow bills on a day to day basis, no one is more important in the legislative arena than YOU, the legislators' constituent. You hold the key to your legislators' political future. Beyond the fact that you have the power of the ballot, you have the power of knowledge of occupational therapy. Most legislators will have little or no exposure to occupational therapy even though they are asked to make decisions that may impact how you perform your job. There are few, if any, legislators with a healthcare background. You can be the expert they turn to during the legislative process.

Effective Communication With Legislators

The most important rule when communicating with your legislator is **MAKE IT PERSONAL**

- Tell your story in your own words. Don't worry about being an expert on legislation. Your personal message is more effective than anything else you can say. Explain how you think legislation might affect your patients, your profession, and/or the health care system.
- Establish a relationship with your state Representative and Senator. If you live in one district but work in another, contact the legislators in both districts. Don't wait until there is a legislative crisis to get to know your elected officials. After an election send them a note of congratulations on their election. Identify yourself as an OT or OTA and offer to be a resource for them on health care issues.

What are the most effective ways to contact my legislator?

Personal visits in their district office or in the Capitol

Handwritten letter

Telephone call to their office. Provide your name, address and contact information along with a short message about your position (e.g. support HB xxx or oppose SB xxx)

What are the least effective ways to contact my legislator?

Calls with no personal information or from people not in the legislator's district

Form letters

Petitions

Picketing legislative offices

Fundamental Do's and Don'ts

DO

Identify the bill number and subject matter you're interested in

Be specific about the action you want your legislator to take, either support or oppose

Treat the legislator as a friendly, intelligent person trying to make good decisions

Treat their staff with courtesy and respect – they can be your best ally

Follow up with any additional information you have agreed to provide

Send a thank you note if you visit your legislator and reiterate the main points of your visit. It's important to know how your legislator votes on our issues. Communicate with them to let them know you're paying attention.

DON'T

Don't begin on a righteous note ("As a citizen and taxpayer" or "As a concerned citizen"). Legislators realize you pay taxes and are a citizen.

Don't apologize for writing or taking their time. Their job is to listen to their constituents. If your communication is short and clearly expresses an opinion it will be appreciated.

Don't be rude or threatening. Don't hint that you won't vote the legislator unless they vote the way you want.

Don't link campaign contributions to legislative support.

Get frustrated if a legislator is late for your meeting or not in their office. Legislators have many demands on their time and do their best to keep appointments but it may not always be possible. As their staff's advice and help on how best to get a few moments of the legislator's time. If visiting the Capitol, the only time you may get with a legislator is to walk from their office to the Capitol with them, but you will have their attention.

Don't give an answer to a question that you don't know the answer to. "I don't know but I'll find out" is always an acceptable answer, *as long as you follow up with the answer.*

If you don't know who your legislators are you can find them at www.ilga.gov in the Legislator Lookup section of Additional Resources.