

ADVOCACY IN ACTION SERIES

This series of articles, by the CFA Legislative Group, are developed to provide information for cat fanciers as a reference in today's legislative climate. We recommend that fanciers read these guides, copy and keep them in a binder or file folder, ready for the future when needed.

Writing, emailing, and calling legislators deconstructed.

Tips for effective communication with your legislators.

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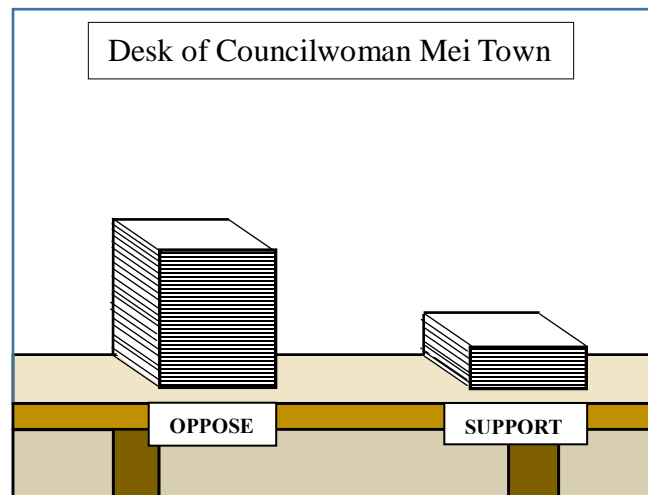
Communication with our elected officials is a critical component of grassroots advocacy. For effective grassroots communication use the tips below. Before jumping down to the tips, however, keep in mind that in grassroots advocacy numbers count. Too much information can overwhelm your legislator. However, if you are authorized to write on behalf of an organization or are an expert writing in the area of your expertise, you might want to include more detailed information. Individuals do yourself a favor: keep it simple and to the point.

Letter Tips

- 1. Use proper salutation in the address and greeting.** In the address the salutation should be “The Honorable Mei Town.” The greeting should read “Dear Senator Midistrict.” If the legislator you are writing happens to be Chair of the committee considering the legislation, address them as “Chairperson Mystate”.
- 2. Identify the legislation, by title and number, and your purpose.** Do this in the subject line (RE: HB 567 as amended on 6/13/2014, Breeder Licensing, OPPOSE) above your salutation to make it easy for those sorting the letters into stacks. You need to be clear about the bill version so as not to cause confusion as not all versions will necessarily have the same objections.

You will also need to work the same information into your first and last paragraphs of your letter without the regimented style of the subject line. The body of your letter is where you try to persuade your legislator to come around to your point of view by describing the legislation and the problems with it. Including this information in the first paragraph provides the legislator the correct focus for the rest of the letter and acts as a reminder of what you want when included in your last paragraph.

In some circumstances the opinions of constituents, people that can vote a legislator into office, carry more weight with the legislator. Thus it is a good idea to include “I live in district 13” in the first paragraph when writing your legislator. Since boundaries can change often, especially at lower levels of government, so be sure to check what legislative districts you are in and who you should write.



Cover only one piece of legislation per letter. You may have concerns about 3 pieces of legislation and you may be writing the same legislator about all three. Avoid the temptation to cover it all in one letter. Your letter will only go in one stack of letters. Don't lose your voice on 2 of the pieces of legislation by combining everything in one letter.

- 3. Include key information.** Understand the proposed legislation and the associated issues. Describe what the proposed ordinance will do and explain what the potential impact will be. For example:

Limit laws cannot cure mental illnesses which may result in hoarding or abuse. What limit laws do is deprive pets of owners that but for an arbitrary number would be an excellent home. It will also greatly reduce the number of foster homes available for adoptable pets resulting in more euthanasia. No reasonable person wants this outcome.

- 4. Describe how the proposed legislation will affect you personally.** This tells the legislator that you have a personal stake in the matter. Also legislators mine letters for stories to support the position the legislator chooses to take. For example, a pet owner might write:

My veterinarian has earned my utmost faith and confidence in his knowledge and capabilities. He refuses to perform spay or neuter prior to the age of 6 months and may require that such procedures happen much later depending on the breed and current veterinary practices. Mandatory sterilization at 4 months of age would force me to choose a veterinarian whose competence is unknown to me or my vet will have to go through the hassle of writing letters to animal control for every single client he has that is too young to be sterilized.

- 5. Limit your letter to 1 to 3 points.** You do not have to explain every little thing that is wrong with the proposal. The large issues are the ones that will make your point most effectively.
- 6. Be professional and polite.** People don't respond well to derisiveness and someone who is overly emotional will distract people from the points they are trying to make.
- 7. What to do in your closing paragraph.** Recap your purpose, identify the legislation, and re-state your legislative request (oppose, support). You may also request a response so that you know where your legislator stands on the legislation.
- 8. Use your own words.** Legislators greatly discount form letters. A legislator may count form letters only once. Another legislator may count 1 out of every 500 form letters. They may provide inspiration for your own letter but if you want to maximize your voice, nothing beats writing your own letter.
- 9. Include your return address.** Including your address is another clue to the legislator's staff on how to count your voice. Although constituents might rank highest in some situations, if you have a connection with the location make sure you include it. Perhaps you have family, regularly visit or conduct business there or plan to retire in the area. Let the legislator know if their decision will affect you. In other situations being a constituent is not as important, such as when bills are in committee. Include your address anyway as it may be discarded if there is

no address at all.

- 10. Proofread.** Better yet, have a friend proofread it for you. If you are like me, you tend to read what you think you wrote rather than what is actually written. You can also read your letter out loud. That will help you hear some mistakes.

Emails

If your legislator prefers email, then you need only follow the letter writing tips plus one. Attachments to emails may contain a virus or other unfriendly digital attachment. So don't use them. They are unlikely to be opened and your email may suffer that same fate. If you need to include information that supports your main points, insert that information within the email below your signature. Don't forget to refer to that information in the body of your email.

Some legislators have gone to using web form only for emails. This may require deviations for their preferred format as some will be more limiting than others. In these cases you will have to do what works best given the restrictions of the web page format.

Calls

The obvious difference with calls is that you are live. If you are like me live is not your optimum forum. In high school I played a pirate in the play Peter Pan. I had all of two lines – “Aye, aye Captain” and my death scream. The second night I forgot to die. Fortunately, our Captain Hook was a great ad libber.

Fortunately, there are things you can do to reduce stage fright. Prepare an outline of what you want to say. Don't memorize it or read it. You don't want to sound rehearsed. Eliminate possible distractions as much as you can.

When you call be prepared to speak to either your legislator or a member of his staff. If the legislator is not available, request to speak to the member of his staff that handles the legislation for which you are calling. Ask to leave a brief message.

There are important advantages to the phone call you just don't have with written communication. You may have the opportunity educate the legislator or staff member on the issues. Just don't get drawn into an argument!

Many of the guidelines you use for letters, you will use for calls to your legislators. You need to identify yourself, the legislation, explain why you oppose or support it, make it personal, and ask the legislator to oppose or support it and ask for the position of the legislator. You want to be professional, polite and brief. Don't forget to thank the person who helped you or the legislator for listening.

Send a follow up letter. Not only is it polite, it gives you another chance to state your position. This is another advantage to the phone call.