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HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH CONGRESS

TIPS FOR WRITING TO CONGRESS:

Heightened security measures have drastically increased the time it takes for a letter sent by post to reach a congressional office. More and more, citizens are using emails and faxed to communicate their concerns and increasingly elected officials' offices prefer electronic communications for constituent contact. As a general rule, Members of Congress are far more likely to heed your message if you are one of their constituents.

Addressing your correspondence:

- To a Senator:
The Honorable (full name) _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (Last Name),

- To a Representative:
The Honorable (full name) _____
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. (Last Name)

- TIP: When writing to the Chair of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, it is proper to address him/her as: Dear Mr. Chairman or Madam Chairwoman; or Dear Madam Speaker

Purpose of your letter:

- State your purpose for writing in the first sentence of the letter
- If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it. Make sure you are referencing the correct legislation to the correct body of Congress. House bills are H.R. _____ and Senate Bills are designated as S. _____
- Be courteous
- If appropriate, include personal information about the issue matter to you.
- Address only one issue in each letter or email

TIPS FOR CALLING CONGRESS:

Telephone calls are usually taken by a staff member. Ask to speak with the aide who handles the issue about which you wish to comment.

After identifying yourself as a constituent, tell the aide you would like to leave a brief message, such as “Please tell Senator/Representative (Name) that I support/oppose (S. ____/H.R. ____).”

State your reasons for your support or opposition to the bill. Ask for your senators’ or representative’s position on the bill. You may also request a written response to your telephone call.

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PERSONAL VISIT:

Meeting with a Member of Congress, or congressional staff, is a very effective way to convey a message about a specific issue of 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 congressional 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 your Member, be punctual and be patient. It is not uncommon for a Congressman or Congresswoman 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 the Member’s staff.

Be Prepared:

Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials supporting your position. 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:

Members of Congress want to represent the best interests of their district or state. 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, remember to ask for *commitment* to the community.

Be Responsive:

Be prepared to answer questions 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.

SUGGESTED MEETING AGENDA:**Introductions (3–5 minutes):**

When introducing yourself in a congressional meeting, take the opportunity to identify yourself as a constituent and to show your connections to other constituents. If you are representing a larger group, name it and your title, if you have one. Say how many members you have in the community or in the country. Also, at this time, one person from your group should present the community letters you collected.

Example: “Hello, my name is Aisha Ali. While I am cardiologist by profession, I’m here representing my mosque, the Islamic Center of America, which I am a member of. We have about 25 other members who could not be here today, including the President.”

Background (5 Minutes):

Use the “Summary of Talking Points” in MPAC’s Truth Over Fear campaign to explain the situation and your concerns with documentaries like “Obsession” and the phenomena of Islamophobia. In addition, this is a good time to talk about why you, as an individual and a community, got involved with MPAC’s Truth Over Fear campaign. Stories engage people and are a useful lobbying tool.

Policy and Action (5–7 minutes):

Clearly explain what you want your member of Congress to do to help protect counter Islamophobia and promote the inclusion of Muslim Americans in national and local conversations. The key point to emphasize is that there are simple things that the Congress can and has done that will help. For example, pass a resolution denouncing Islamophobia and recognizing the important role Muslim Americans play in America's pluralism and in protecting the country.

Asks (5 minutes):

Clearly articulate your "asks" and be specific. DO NOT present them as suggestions. For each "ask," state the desired action, and then seek a commitment from the member of Congress to carry it out.

For example, ask your representative to:

1. Make a commitment to be sensitive to the language he/she uses by separating noble adjectives like "Islamic" from criminal actions like "terrorism"
2. Invite leaders of mainstream community-based Muslim American organizations to participate in congressional hearings and NOT to invite
3. Host a forum in Washington D.C. with MPAC about Islamophobia
4. Engage his/her local Muslim American community by addressing them and listening to their concerns at a town hall meeting arranged by you or your mosque/organization/institution

If your representative seems reluctant, ask what concerns or reservations they have. Address them as best you can, but also emphasize that you, as a concerned constituent, want this to happen.

If your representative says he/she needs to look into it further, offer to provide additional information and make it clear that you will follow up with him/her and watch future action. Send any questions you have to us and we will help you find an answer to send to them.

If your representative makes the commitment, thank him/her, emphasize the value of action, request details of the follow-through process that you can watch for to hold he/she accountable.

In all three cases, put forward a clear plan to follow up, and make sure to get the card and/or contact information of the person with whom you meet.

Express Gratitude:

As you leave, be sure to profusely thank the person(s) you've met with for their time and concern. It is also a good idea to email or fax a thank you in to the person you met with. Make sure to also follow up on their commitments about one week from your initial meeting.

Report Back:

Make sure to contact MPAC via email or web to let us know who you met with, how it went, what your representative's office committed to and what the rough timeline looks like. Even if all that was agreed upon was to look into holding a program, let us know so that we have information on our congressional targets.

** If you would like MPAC to accompany you in your initial meeting, please contact Sireen Sawaf, MPAC's Southern California Government Relations Director, at sireen@mpac.org or via phone at (213) 383-3443 and we will do our best to join you.*