



Disability Advocacy Day 2022

**Building
Relationships
with
Policymakers**

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Session Housekeeping

- Closed captioning and interpretation is still available in these breakout sessions.
- We will be recording this session, so please keep that in mind.
- We will also be sending out follow up materials and other information afterwards, so you will have a copy of the recording, presentation, and other materials

Introductions

- **Matthew Wappett, PhD**— Executive Director of the USU Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice
- **Janis Ferre**— Founding Member of the Legislative Coalition for Persons with Disabilities (LCPD) and Advocate Extraordinaire

Overview

- Why advocacy is so important in disability services
- Why you need to build relationships with legislators
- How to structure a visit with your legislator
- What to cover in your visit
- Following up
- Other advocacy strategies

Why Disability is Different

- Disability services are almost entirely defined by law, both state and federal.
- Disability services were supported by the government going back to the 1600's in Europe and that trend has continued for the past 400 years.
- People with disabilities, moreso than any other group, live lives that are defined by government programs and funding.
- Therefore, improving disability services means that we have to engage with the political system in order to make change.

Building Relationships

- Our political system is run by elected citizens, and like anyone else, they like to feel connected and supported.
- Like any relationship, working with policymakers requires effort, preparation, and passion.
- As you build a relationship, you will find that legislators will learn to trust and value your input and perspective.

Setting Up a Visit

- The best way to have your voice heard is to schedule a dedicated time to meet with your legislator.
- Determine who your legislator is: <https://le.utah.gov/GIS/findDistrict.jsp>
- When you call your legislator's office:
 1. Identify yourself and briefly introduce yourself as a constituent and voter.
 2. Explain why you want to visit and ask to set up a time to come in to speak with the legislator either in the district or Capitol office.
 3. If the legislator is unavailable, meeting with staff members is also a great opportunity as they play important roles in shaping priorities. More than likely, you will meet with the staff person who covers health and/or education issues.

Setting Up a Visit: Part 2

- If meeting with the Senator or Representative, you may be asked to send a written request for the visit. Many offices will request a letter/email.
- Always refer to your legislator as “The Honorable (Name)” in addressing the envelope and the letter. In the salutation, write: “Dear Senator,” “Dear Congressman,” “Dear Congresswoman,” or “Dear Representative” so your message doesn’t look like junk mail.
- The letter/email needs to include
 - who will be part of the visit: names and affiliations
 - a short description of why you want to meet with the legislator.
- **Identify yourself as a voter, and if possible, it’s a good idea to personalize the issue you wish to meet about through a compelling personal story.**

Preparing for Your Meeting

- The most important thing to do is to prepare your message.
- All planning for a legislative visit must be firmly rooted in a clear and concise message.
- Clearly identify a problem and purpose for visiting: It could simply be a meeting to get to know one another.
- You don't have to wait until there is a pressing issue, and a visit doesn't have to be just about lobbying.
- Often the most valuable visits are those where you educate and inform policymakers on how specific programs or policies are working for you.

Preparing: Do your Research

- Know your legislator. Review his/her biography. Learn their party affiliation, committee and subcommittee membership and past record on the issue you will be discussing.
- Knowing these facts will help guide your discussion and demonstrate that you have adequately prepared for the visit.

Preparing : Materials

- Prepare a one-page fact sheet about your specific issue, highlighting the message you want the legislator to understand. This fact sheet should be concise, but clear about your issue and its impact on you and your family.
- You should also remember to give you legislator your business card, or a contact sheet, so they can follow up with you if they have additional questions after your visit.
- Although not necessary, you may also wish to bring additional supporting information like position papers, editorials, and/or fact sheets about the particular legislation/issue you are advocating for.

Preparing : Strategize Cooperatively

- If you are visiting with a group, you should take the time before the visit to formulate a strategy with everyone attending the meeting. You want to appear professional and coordinated in your messaging, so you should:
 - Decide who will make what points.
 - Have facts lined up prior to the meeting.
 - Keep focused on the issue you requested to meet about.
 - Be prepared for questions, and think through possible solutions.

During Your Visit

- Be punctual and friendly, even if you don't agree with them.
- Deliver your message. Be concise.
- Be sure to explain all acronyms, programs, funding sources and which agencies administer the funds.
- Talk about how the issue impacts you and your family!
- Ask for a commitment.
- Be prepared, but honest, when you get questions

Following Up

- **Immediately after the visit:** Follow up with a thank you letter outlining the points covered during the meeting and include any additional information that was requested.
- **On-going efforts:** Send reports and newspaper articles relevant to your issue in Utah and elsewhere to your legislator. Ask others – friends, family members, school personnel, community members, religious and business leaders, and neighbors – to write letters to the legislator that support your position.

Next Steps...

- A legislative visit should not be a one-time event! The more often you visit legislators, the more comfortable you will get with the process.
- The most important element in visits with legislators is establishing a personal connection that will continue in the future.
- In order to maximize effectiveness, you should have a plan that fits into a more extensive advocacy agenda, then when your legislator is called upon to show leadership for disability related issues, he/she may draw upon their knowledge and impressions gleaned during their visit with you and other advocates.

During the Session

- If you want to speak to your legislator while they are in session at the Capitol you will need to know where they are.
- For a schedule of the session, go to <https://le.utah.gov/> and click on the “Calendar” link in the bottom center of the page.
- You can always testify in sessions, run into your legislator between meetings, send them a not when they are in session, or text them just prior to a vote...but the effectiveness of these efforts will largely be dictated by the relationship you have built with them before.

Other Tips

- You can call, text or email. Email is the preferred method of communication during the 45-day session, but you can also text legislators during the session, and you can find many legislators' contact information on their legislative contact page here:
 - 2022 Utah House Members: <http://house.utah.gov/house-members/>
 - 2022 Utah Senate Roster: <https://senate.utah.gov/senate-roster/>
- Make sure that you keep the communication simple. Many seasoned advocates warn against long-winded emails to rant at a lawmaker about a particular bill or issue. Using bots, forwarding mass emails, or copy/pasting boilerplate emails to lawmakers is also considered largely ineffective.