

Advocacy:

A Guide for Art Therapists



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Communicating with Congress

Each year, Congress approves (or fails to approve) hundreds of bills that affect each of our lives in some way or another. Many of the “more important” bills (the one’s that affect us all) are covered by the news and spark people to debate the issues and take action by contacting their Representative and Senators.

Unfortunately, most of the provisions that will affect you as an art therapist don’t make the news. They are a few lines buried in a 300-page bill, but they are the provisions that determine whether Medicare will reimburse you or whether your agency will receive enough grant money to continue paying you.

As art therapy professionals, your input is important. You will shape the profession for decades to come and you need to be aware of what Congress is doing so you can take action.

The work being done in Washington, DC, will affect your life at home; why not have some input. Fortunately, it’s easier than ever...

Writing, Faxing, and E-mailing

Members of Congress and their staffs pay careful attention to their correspondence (i.e. letters, faxes, e-mail) since it forms the major body of public and voter sentiment on pending legislative activity.

However, the volume of contacts they receive—especially emails—has skyrocketed over the past few years. According to a 2005 survey by the Congressional Management Fund (CMF), entitled “Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy,” Members of Congress are attempting to respond to roughly four times as many contacts as they were ten years ago, with virtually no additional staff. As the report states, “Most of the increase in volume has resulted from citizens working through some kind of organized campaign, rather than on their own.”

Although Congressional offices like the fact that more people are engaged in the policymaking process, they’re not too thrilled about the form letters and emails which make up an increasing proportion of the contacts they receive. More than ever, offices value direct, heart-felt personal emails and letters. As stated by one House staff member CMF talked to, “**One hundred form letters have less direct value than a single thoughtful letter generated by a constituent of the Member’s district.**” Advocates must respond to the vast *quantity* of emails and letters offices receive by increasing the *quality* of their emails and letters, in order to cut through the noise.

Email is now the prominent form of communication with elected officials, at least

in terms of volume. Virtually all of the explosive growth in communications with members of Congress over the past several years has been due to the use of email.

This is a double-edged sword. While it's now easier than ever to send a message to your legislator, it's getting harder and harder for your legislator to see the individual trees within the forest. As discussed earlier, it's now imperative that you minimize the chances that your email gets lost in the deluge by taking the time to make it a high-quality contact, and by coming back later to follow up. According to the CMF report, the number one implication of the increase volume for citizens and the grassroots community is:

Quality is more important than quantity,

Thoughtful, personalized constituent messages generally have more influence than a large number of identical form messages. (To put it bluntly, form letters tell staff and Members that you didn't care enough about the issue to put down your own thoughts...so why should they?). Grassroots campaigns should consider placing greater emphasis on generating messages of higher quality and reducing form communications.¹

Some tips for writing to your legislator:

- Be brief—keep your correspondence to one page if at all possible.
- Stick to one issue.
- Refer to legislation by its bill number or title, if it's been introduced. If you don't know the number or title of a bill, learn it!
- Be specific. Explicitly ask the legislator to do something (vote for legislation X, cosponsor bill Y, sign on to a letter opposing bill Z). Unless you ask for something specific, your legislator can and will respond with only vague, niceties. Make it clear what it is you want him or her to do and make sure they give you a straight answer.
- Tell the legislator how and why the issue you're writing about affects you and your community. **Personalize your message.** Connecting the dots from policy to individual constituents is arguably the most important component of any communication with a legislator. Maybe you'll even get mentioned in a floor speech.
- Don't be disrespectful or nasty. If you know your legislator's position on an issue differs from yours feel free to tell him or why, but be courteous and professional.
- Be sure to include your name and mailing address in your correspondence.
- Keep a copy of your correspondence. Like everyone else, legislative

¹ "Communicating with Congress," Congressional Management Foundation, 2005, online at http://www.cmfweb.org/storage/cmfweb/documents/CMF_Pubs/communicatingwithcongress_report1.pdf

offices occasionally suffer from technical (or non-technical) difficulties, and my lose track of it.

Finding the Right Address

To find email addresses for the United States Senate, go to www.senate.gov. Email addresses for the U.S. House of Representatives can be found at www.house.gov. Many congressional offices encourage constituents to use email to communicate with them, and have forms on their website for submitting comments.

How To Address Letters

United State Representatives

The Honorable Jane Doe
U.S. House of Representatives
Office #
Washington, D.C. 20515

United State Senators

The Honorable Jane Doe
United State Senate
Office #
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Congresswoman Doe:

Dear Senator Doe:

Following up, Follow up, Follow up!

After you send in a letter or an email, it's highly likely that one of two things will happen:

- *You wait...and wait...and wait.* It is very likely that you won't get a response for two or three weeks. If it's been more than three weeks and you still haven't seen anything, you need to do two things.
 1. Check on the status of the legislation that you wrote about. Has the bill already been voted on? Was it already reported out of committee? In other words, is your original request still pertinent.
 2. Contact the office again. If the status of the legislation has changed, send a second letter or email thanking the legislator for voting the right way (or expressing disappointment if the legislator voted the wrong way), or making an updated request for action. If the issue is still pending and nothing has changed, **call** the office and politely check to make sure they received your original email or letter, and offer to send it again if necessary.
- *You get a letter back on your general topic that doesn't address your specific issue.* Take a deep breath, and remember that more than 200 million letters and emails are sent to Members of Congress each year. After you've done that, either call or write back to the office. Politely state that you appreciate the response, but you'd still like the legislator to address your particular issue (i.e., either take the action that you requested, or explain why they won't). You asked for a specific action, hold them accountable for a specific answer.

Notice the repeated use of the word "politely." When a staff member sees an angry letter, they are more likely to discount it. Angry letters are not any more

influential than nice ones; in fact, do very little except make you look unreasonable. Don't get bent out of shape, just respectfully make it clear that you care enough about the issue to continue paying attention. Consistent attention to an issue gets results.

Calling

If you want some immediate feedback and do not want to write or email your Member of Congress, you can call their national or district office. You can reach any national office by calling 202-224-3121 and asking for your Member of Congress. If you want to make a local call, visit the House and Senate websites (see above) to find your phone numbers for your member's district offices.

When the receptionist answers the phone tell him/her that you'd like to leave a message for the Representative/Senator and what the topic is. He/she may take your comments directly or he/she may transfer you to a staff member who specifically deals with that issue.

The same tips for writing to your legislator apply to making phone calls. Write down some brief talking points before calling; know what you want to say, how it relates to your personal experience, and what you are asking the Representative/Senator to do.

You will only have a few short minutes to talk to the staff, so make your point and answer their questions briefly. Extremely long-winded constituents quickly become notorious in an office.

Three basic requirements before picking up the pen, phone, or keyboard:

1. *Know your issue.* Take a few minutes to do the proper research before writing to your Member of Congress. You can find information about the issues affecting the art therapy profession at <http://www.americanarttherapyassociation.org/aata-advocacy.html>. If you know what you're talking about, legislators will be able to tell and will take your letter more seriously. You can sacrifice some real gains if you fudged some of your information (or just don't bother to look it up).
2. *Know your legislation.* Your communication will not be effective if the action you're asking the legislator to take isn't possible: how can she vote for your bill if it was already approved a month ago? Asking your legislator to cosponsor a bill that he already has sends the signal that you don't care that much about the issue. You can research any bill or resolution by going to www.thomas.gov and entering the bill number or keyword.
3. *Know your legislator.* It is crucial that you know If your legislator has already taken a position on your issue. If he/she has already taken a position opposite to yours, explain why you believe he/she should reconsider. If he/she has taken the action that you want, then thank them. Legislators get far too few emails thanking them for the things that they do

“get right.”

Face-to-face meetings

Recent research has found that face-to-face constituent meetings are often the most influential for Members of Congress and their staff. If you would like to set up a face-to-face meeting, write a letter to the legislator explaining your issue and asking if you can meet him/her (or someone on his/her staff). If you will be in Washington, D.C. soon, tell them when you will be in town and ask if they can accommodate you during that time. Otherwise, try to set up a meeting at the district office when it is convenient for everyone.

Members of Congress are extremely busy, so if and when you do get to meet them, you will only have a few minutes to talk (even when you are meeting with staff, you will only have about 15 minutes to talk). Don't be offended if they have to duck out to vote, etc. and be prepared to meet anywhere (hallways are popular meeting spots in the House).

When the meeting begins, take a few minutes to get acquainted with the Member or staff; a good personal connection can make all the difference in a meeting. Briefly explain your issue and why you think it is important; spend the most time explaining who you are and how federal policies affect you. Answer questions to the best of your ability; if you don't know something, be honest. When the meeting is over, thank the Member or staff for his/her time and offer to follow up in a few weeks.

Face-to-face meetings can be a great experience if you are properly prepared. Feel free to call us if you would like help getting ready for your meeting.

Conclusion

There are few things that are more influential in Washington, D.C., than consistent, heart-felt constituent feedback. Elected officials are just that, elected. For all of the media coverage of special interest groups, your legislators know who elects them, and they will respond to you if they know you are paying attention.

Thanks to technology, staying in touch with your Members of Congress is easy enough. Please feel free to contact someone in the AATA's Office of Public Policy and Legislation if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions. You can even contact us if you need a hand preparing to call, write to, or meet with your Representative or Senators. We are always happy to hear from you.

Most all remember that Members of Congress work for **you**, and if they aren't doing a good job, you can fire them in the next election.