

Personal Visit Follow Up: Letters to Legislators

Never underestimate the power of a constituent's letter. Letters expressing a given viewpoint can change a legislator's mind. It is particularly helpful when that legislator is wavering on an issue. Personalized or even handwritten letters from constituents, on their own stationery, are the most effective.

A letter also continues to develop the rapport with your legislator and his or her staff during your visit(s). In addition to contacting them about specific legislation or issues, it is appropriate to congratulate them on honors received or elections won or thank them for a positive vote on your issue or on actions taken that are important to the community. Legislators appreciate, but seldom receive, thank you letters for actions taken. Be among those who show appreciation for their support.

It is important that letters be as simple and clear as possible. To make your letter more effective:

- **Keep It Short.** Limit your letter to one or two pages.
- **Be Specific.** State the action you want the legislator to take: (1) Vote in a certain manner; (2) Introduce legislation; (3) Co-sponsor a bill or; (4) Make a floor statement. If the member expresses support for your position, hold him or her to that commitment. Whenever possible, refer to a specific piece of legislation or public law by its number.
- **Use Appropriate Address and Salutation.** Use the correct title, address and salutation and spell each correctly.
- **Be positive.** Legislators, like most of us, respond best to praise, not criticism. Tell them you supported them in the past (if you did) and how you need their help. It is also appropriate to acknowledge their previous support on this or other issues.
- **Ask For a Reply.** When they do reply—and they usually will—write again. Compliment positive actions taken or encourage reconsideration of actions not taken. When a legislator differs from your position, his or her response may include such language as “careful study” or “due consideration” or “keeping your comments in mind.” These are often negative indicators and do not show commitment. Write back for clarification. Doing so lets the legislator know that you are not easily misled, are serious about the issue and are following his or her actions carefully.
- **Establish Yourself as a Resource.** You are an expert in your field and can provide additional information regarding the field, the issue and the impact of proposed legislation.

Sample Letter to a Member of Congress

Use Letterhead OR
Your Name
Your Address
Your City, State, Zip Code

Date

To a Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

To a Representative:

The Honorable (full name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

Introduction

- Identify yourself
- Briefly reference your occupation or business
- Identify your purpose in writing (AOPA Action Alert will give you this; otherwise, say you want to meet with him or her to talk about O&P issues)

Purpose of Letter

- Explain why you are writing
- Reference by bill name and/or number, if appropriate
- Give facts, figures, and/or personal experiences and anecdotes that support your position

Closing

- Request a reply indicating his or her position regarding your request
- Establish yourself as a resource
- Thank the member of Congress for his or her consideration of your position

Sincerely,

(Signature)
Your Name