

Communicating with Elected Officials



Disability rights advocates in Myanmar lead an electoral inclusion workshop for election management officials.

Source: Myanmar Independent Living Initiative (MILI)

When conducting an advocacy campaign, often there is a need to communicate with elected officials. Campaigns are good opportunities to educate elected officials about the issues that are important to the disability community in your country, and some elected officials may even be persuaded to become allies or supporters of your campaign.

There are many different ways to contact elected officials, which are described below. The method of communication will depend on when you are trying to contact an elected official, who you are trying to contact, and the type of message you want to share.

Different Communication Methods to Reach Elected Officials

Common methods include:

1. Position papers
2. Information packets
3. Letters to elected officials
4. In-person meetings with elected officials
5. Telephone calls and text messages
6. Working with the media
7. Letters to the editor
8. Marches/rallies/demonstrations
9. Signature campaigns (petitions)
10. Inviting an elected official to an event or a site visit
11. Questions at question time (in parliament)
12. Formal testimony
13. Drafting legislation

1. Position papers

A position paper is a communication guide for speaking about your disability rights issue to the media, to members of your organization, and to elected officials.

A good position paper should:

- **Explain the problem**

Describe the problem for which you are suggesting political action. Use as much number-related (quantitative) data as possible.

- **Provide some background information**
Briefly explain how the problem has grown or changed over time and what laws or political action (if there are any) has already happened.
- **Propose a solution**
Clearly describe the political action you want the elected official to take (for example, supporting a new law). Be sure to anticipate and address any objections that might come up.
- **Have a clear timeline**
Be specific about the precise dates by which you hope to see action, and explain why it is important to act soon.

In most cases, you will need to create more than one version of a position paper:

- **A long version for the members of the organization**
The original, long version of the position paper can be used by members of your organization when they write articles for press releases and speeches for conferences.
- **A short version for elected officials**
Elected officials do not have a lot of time for reading. Therefore, the short version of your paper must be one or two pages. Bullet points are often easiest way to read quickly.
- **Translated versions**
You may need to translate your documents into more than one language or provide the materials in accessible formats.

2. Supporting information packets

An easy way to build gain support from an elected official is to give them research related to the issue you are working on. At the parliamentary level, Members of Parliament (MPs) who have been placed on committees are often responsible for presenting bills about which they might know very little. If you can help them by preparing presentations related to the issues you are working on, you will increase their trust, respect and support for your advocacy work.

3. Letters to elected officials

A letter to an elected official should be short. It should never be more than one and a half pages. Letters written on personal stationary often have a greater impact than impersonal, form-printed letters. They may be mailed, faxed or e-mailed.

Keep the language in the letter neutral. It is natural to write passionately about your issue, but you need to be careful to keep the language soft and pleasant. The best letters follow the below outline:

- Subject line (for example, “Re: Bill #__ on reserved seats for persons with disabilities”)
- Greeting
- What you want the elected official to do
- Who you are or who your group is
- What the problem is
- Why a solution is needed
- Repeat what you are asking the elected official to do
- Closing

4. In-person meetings with elected officials

Face-to-face meetings are less formal and can be engaging and memorable. Through successful meetings, your group can create an ongoing and productive relationship with an elected official.

Arranging the meeting:

- Find out how to contact the elected official.
- Make the appointment.
- Ask how much time is available so you can plan what you will say.

Preparing for the meeting:

- Choose two or three speakers to attend the meeting.
- Provide a brief written summary of your case and a little bit about your organization’s mission and area of work.
- Present a couple of facts and statistics on your issue. Also, share a few stories that illustrate your arguments. Stories can help elected officials understand and connect with the issue.
- Agree on when each person will speak and what they will speak about.
- Practice your presentation (to each other or just in front of the mirror).
- Assign someone to take notes.
- Arrive at least five minutes early.

The meeting:

- Ask again how much time the elected official has. Be prepared that the meeting may be shorter than the original time agreed upon.



DPO representatives in the Dominican Republic shake hands with a politician after advocacy for a new policy platform.

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems

- Introduce everyone in your group and explain why you wanted to meet.
- Try to keep your conversation focused on a few basic points. If the elected official changes the topic, gently return to your main point.
- Ask the elected official if they have any questions. If you do not know the answer, say so and offer to find the answer and get back to them.
- Do not be angry, discourteous or sarcastic. On rare occasions, an elected official may strongly disagree with your concerns. If that is the case, repeat your key points and then end the meeting.
- Try to get a commitment. Ask the elected official or policy maker to do something specific to show support for your issue.

After the meeting with the elected official

- Write a thank you note and confirm any promises the elected official made during the meeting.
- If there were requests for more information, make sure you provide the information.
- Keep a record of what was said at the meeting on file at your organization, especially if the elected official made any commitments to your group. These notes can be useful for preparing future meetings, holding the elected official to the position they stated, and tracking where other elected officials stand on the issue.



A leader of a political party in Kosovo meets with some election access observers.

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems

5. Telephone calls and text messages

Telephone calls or text messages sent directly to elected officials can be powerful advocacy tools, especially before a vote. Ten or 20 messages can really have an impact. Telephone calls from people who personally know the elected official can be especially influential.

You must leave a very short message (as little as two sentences). One sentence should explain the action you want, and the second sentence should explain why. If you cannot reach the elected official, talk to their staff person.

6. Working with the media

Press releases help create an environment that pressures elected officials to act. All elected officials are sensitive to media coverage, especially in their home districts.

A good press release should be short, with the most important information covered in the first paragraph. The press release should have a positive message, whenever possible.

Only send news to the media that is truly newsworthy and completely accurate. The press loves good quotes, so the more you can make short, memorable and clear statements, the more likely the press will ask for your comments when your issue appears in the news.

Your organization should choose one or two people that are responsible for talking to the media. This will enable your organization to speak with one voice.

7. Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor can sometimes be helpful. Check the newspaper's rules, but in general:

- Keep the letter short (150-250 words).
- Mention the reason for the letter in the first sentence.
- Limit the content to one or two key points.
- Say why it matters, describe the need (the problem), specify what needs to be done and ask those with the power to make it happen.
- Include your name, address and phone number.



An election monitor from Nepal speaks with the local media about the importance of inclusion.

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems

8. Marches/rallies/demonstrations

Marches, rallies and demonstrations can be a strong expression of broad public support. However, it can also make some politicians nervous about supporting your issue. Demonstrations should be used carefully and should be fully supported by your membership before going forward.

9. Signature campaigns (petitions)

Petitions that show strong support for your cause can be very effective. The amount of signatures needed will vary. For example, a petition to the Prime Minister on reserved seats for people with disabilities may require over 1,000 signatures, but a petition to a local level government official who may need only 400 to get noticed. This is a time-consuming tactic, but it can be worth it. If not enough signatures are collected, your group can always change tactics.

10. Invite elected officials to an event or a site visit

Host an event and invite an elected official whose support you are seeking. You can create a valuable opportunity for them to speak and this may help in getting their support. Or invite an elected official to visit a place or a group of people which will drive home the message that you want to send, such as a visit to a disabled person's organization in their district.

11. Questions at question time (in parliament)

Question time (sometimes called question hour) in parliament occurs when members ask questions of government ministers (including the Prime Minister), which they are obliged to answer. You will need to advocate with an MP to get them to ask a question about your issue. For example, you might have the MP ask why the government has not acted on a certain piece of legislation.



A disability rights activist from Libya attends a regional conference on political participation by persons with disabilities.

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems

12. Formal testimony

If possible, your group should try to get an expert invited to testify at a parliamentary committee hearing on your issue. Testifying can help establish you as an authority on the issue, and will make your organization better known among committee members.

If you want to testify and have not been asked by the committee, contact committee staff or the chairperson and request to do so. Sometimes you will need to ask a MP to contact the committee chairperson on your behalf to secure an invitation. You will need to prepare a long version of your testimony for the committee's records and a short version to present to the committee members during your presentation.

If parliamentary committee hearings are secret in your country, your group should work with other organizations to change the parliamentary rules of procedure so the public can attend and testify at hearings. This is an important aspect of transparency in the democratic process.

13. Drafting legislation

It is helpful to have members of your group or allies, preferably lawyers, receive training on drafting legislation. In many countries, legislative drafting is not done outside of the government, but it should be included in the skill set of disabled persons' organizations. This is because the government will often not respond to your organization's attempts to get a bill drafted, so it is crucial to be able to do it yourself.

MPs can introduce the bill as a private member bill. It is also useful to have a draft bill if a committee is willing to hold a hearing on the subject, even without an official bill. Having a draft bill also helps your organization be taken seriously by MPs and other decision makers.

This resource was adapted from the International Foundation for Electoral System's Lobby Training Manual.