Visiting a legislator

Face-to-face visits are the most effective form of advocacy. You can request to meet with your legislator in Lansing or attend coffee hours if they have them.

MNA staff can help you arrange your meeting and prepare for it by providing background information, training and materials to share with legislators.

Remember: You’re the expert on your own experiences as a registered nurse. Be confident that what you have to say is valuable. Here are some tips to help you succeed with your advocacy:

Do your research, including research on your legislator. This can help you build a relationship, especially if that person has a background in healthcare. Know the legislation you’re advocating for well, and know which groups support and oppose it. Try to anticipate the arguments against your position, and be prepared to address them.

Budget your time: When you schedule your visit, ask how long your meeting will be. Most are less than 30 minutes, so plan your conversations accordingly.

Accept meetings with staff: It is not uncommon for staff to meet with constituents, since legislators are very busy. These meetings can be very valuable.

Stick to your message: Practice your main points and identify the goal of the meeting before you go. Be concise, stick to basics, and stay focused on ONE issue. Bring BRIEF supportive documents to share (MNA can provide these).

Make it personal and local: Explain why this issue is important to you as a registered nurse and how it affects your patients and community. Give examples (while protecting patient confidentiality). Remember: Sharing your story is powerful.

Make it a conversation: Explain who you are, where you work, the kind of care you provide and who your patients are. Then, after you deliver your message, make sure to listen to the legislator’s concerns and questions. Be aware of the nonverbal signals you’re sending and seeing. Be prepared to adapt if the conversation goes in a surprising direction.

Never lie or mislead someone: If you don’t know something, offer to find the answer and get back to the legislator, or ask MNA staff to do so.
Avoid jargon or acronyms: Most legislators don’t have a healthcare background. Make no assumptions about their level of knowledge. Use the same principles you use when educating patients.

Don’t burn bridges: Always maintain a courteous attitude. It’s OK to disagree with a legislator’s positions or politely correct misconceptions; rudeness, disrespectful behavior and name-calling are inappropriate and counterproductive. That goes for comments you make on social media, too.

Request action: After you make your points, make your expectation clear (e.g., “I’m asking you to vote yes on this bill”) and try to get a commitment. If the legislator is supportive, thank them and reiterate why the issue is important to you. If they don’t agree or won’t commit, keep the door open for more conversations.

AFTER YOUR VISIT: Send a card or letter to thank the legislator for taking the time to talk with you. Highlight the key points of your message and the action you are requesting. Make sure to send any information you said you would provide.

Stay in touch! Effective advocates build relationships with their legislators over time. MNA can guide you on how to be most effective advocate possible given the current legislative strategy and climate. Both of these can change quickly.

Calling your legislator

- Plan exactly what you want to say before you call.
- State your name and identify yourself as a registered nurse and a constituent.
- A staffer will answer. Ask to speak to the staffer who handles the issue.
- Deliver a brief and simple message; for example, “I want the Senator to vote in favor of House Bill 4629.” Say why in a few sentences.
- Always be courteous, even if you disagree with the legislator.
- Leave a phone number and email address where you can be reached; offer to provide more information about the issue.
- If the proper person isn’t available, leave a message or voicemail. Request a call back.
- Follow up with a brief letter (or e-mail).

State Rep. Donna Lasinski, a supporter of the Safe Patient Care Act, met with MNA members to share tips on being effective legislative advocates.

Writing to your legislator

In your email or letter:

- State that you’re a registered nurse and a constituent, or identify any connection with the legislator’s district.
- State your purpose and request in the first paragraph.
- Refer to legislation by number (and title, if appropriate).
- Describe your practice and the population you serve.
- Address only one issue per letter.
- Keep your letter to one page.
- Make your point clearly and courteously.
- Support your position with research or other reliable information and, most of all, your own experiences - as an RN. Examples of how the bill(s) will affect patients, healthcare workers and businesses in the legislator’s district have the greatest impact.
- Be constructive. If you believe certain legislation is the wrong approach, explain what you believe would be a better way.
- End with a thank-you and offer to discuss this (and other nursing issues) further at any time, and include your contact info.

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