

# **Communicating with Hawaii State Legislators**

## *Tips for Success*

### **YOUR GOVERNMENT, YOUR VOICE**

In a representative democracy, power is vested in the people. This power is exercised when the people elect officials to serve as their voices in government, and then communicate their views to those elected. At the Legislative branch, we elect State Senators and Representatives who deal with a wide range of issues. The people of Hawaii have many different needs and perspectives, and it's challenging for the legislators to make decisions that will be acceptable to all of us. But it's important for them to hear from their constituents! Formal testimony during the public hearing process is one avenue. But if you have an idea for a bill, concerns about an issue in your district, or an opinion on a matter pending before the Legislature, don't hesitate to contact legislators directly and let them know your views. They want and need to hear from you!

### **WHO TO CONTACT?**

#### **Finding Your Own Legislator**

The first step is to identify who it is you want to talk to. Most people start with their own Senator and Representative. If you don't already know who they are, the Legislature's website ([capitol.hawaii.gov](http://capitol.hawaii.gov)) has a search tool in the upper right corner that can find them for you. Simply type the name of your street in the search box, hit "Go," and linked names of your elected officials will appear. Clicking on the links brings you their contact information, as well as information that may help you gain a better understanding of their background and experience.

#### **Finding Committee Chairs, Members of Leadership, All Members**

You are not limited to communication with just your own legislators. Depending on what you'd like to do, it may also make sense to contact the chair of a committee, a member of leadership, or even to contact all of the legislators.

- Communicating with a committee chair especially makes sense if you are advocating for an issue or bill that falls in that committee, or are requesting a hearing. To find the chair, simply click on the "Committees" icon on the Legislature's website and select the committee you're interested in. You'll find contact information for the chair and vice chair, and hyperlinks to members of the committee.
- To find members of leadership, click on the "Senate" or "House" bar in the upper right portion of the Legislature's homepage. Then, click on the "Leadership" button -- the members and their contact information appear.
- To find all the legislators' contact information, just click on the "Legislators" button. You may also use one of the handy "information sheets" available on the Public Access Room (PAR) website ([LRBhawaii.org/PAR](http://LRBhawaii.org/PAR)).

### **WHAT TO SAY?**

Once you have identified who to contact, there are various ways in which you can communicate with them. You can write a letter, send an email, make a telephone call, or speak to them in person. Often the first question we receive is how legislators should be addressed. A simple "Senator \_\_\_\_" and "Representative \_\_\_\_" will suffice. "Dear Senator" and "Dear Representative" are appropriate salutations.

But before you make contact, identify your goal: What do you want to ask for? What do you want to say?

- Is there an issue that you need your legislator's assistance with?
- Do you want a bill introduced?
- Do you want to express your opinion and be heard?

Draft a quick outline of what you want to discuss with them. If you need assistance with a community or personal issue, provide as many specifics as possible. If you are requesting a bill be introduced, explain

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what you want the bill to do and why it is needed. If you want to voice your support or opposition on a matter pending before the Legislature, summarize why you hold that opinion. Legislators are busy, so brief and concise communication that gets to the point quickly is appreciated.

### **Some Helpful Tips**

- First off, be courteous and respectful. This is key to effective communication and establishing relationships.
- If you live in their district and are a constituent, let them know. If you need immediate assistance, let them know so they can respond promptly.
- Be mindful that legislative staff can be invaluable in helping you with a situation or in delivering your message to the legislator. Consider speaking with them about your issue. Staff often work closely with legislators and may provide some influence.
- If you're referring to legislation, specify the number of the bill or resolution.
- Use terms that the legislator or staff member will understand; jargon and acronyms may cloud your message.
- Follow up! If you haven't heard back, try another method of communication. Wondering about progress? Check in and find out what action has been taken.

**When Sending an Email or Writing a Letter:** Explain why you are writing. Be brief, concise, and to the point. Remember to provide your name and contact information so they can get back to you!

**When Making a Call:** If leaving voicemail, speak slowly and clearly. Repeat your name and phone number at the end of the call.

### **When Meeting in Person**

- Before meeting with a legislator or staff member, prepare an outline of what you want to talk about. Bring along any supplemental information to help make your case.
- Use the interim (the time between legislative sessions) to try and meet with legislators. Their schedules are much more open.
- Know your issue and be clear and factual when making your presentation.
- If you are bringing a small group of people with you, choose a spokesperson who is reliable, articulate, and knowledgeable on the issue being presented. Legislative offices are not overly large, so limit the number of people. Don't surprise the legislator by bringing someone to a meeting who is not expected.
- Be ready to answer questions or provide more information if it's requested. If you don't know, say so, and agree to follow up.
- Before you leave, try to get a sense from the legislator on how they feel about the issue presented. Are they supportive? In opposition? Non-committal? If appropriate, ask for their support or action.
- Consider "leave behinds" that summarize your position and specify what action you want the legislator to take.

### **Additional Tips**

- If you want to advocate for or against a bill, identify which committees or legislators have ownership over your issue. (PAR can help.) Try to get a feel for where they stand on your issue. When discussing the merits of a bill with them, try to be enthusiastic and energetic, and speak or write with conviction -- if you don't believe what you're saying, your audience won't either!
- Relationships are important at the Capitol. Get to know the legislators and how they operate. Ask them for advice with their legislative colleagues. They all have different ways of learning and making decisions.
- Find allies to help support your cause. Sometimes it's helpful to find an ally who is in a legislator's district. Reach out and develop ties with those who share your views or who may already have relationships with key legislators. They can be helpful in getting your message across.

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