
MOVING-THE-LEGISLATURE PRIMER FOR RHODE ISLAND PHYSICIANS

FIRST THINGS FIRST—WHO REPRESENTS YOU?

Know who your state Representative and state Senator are. You can find out from your town hall clerk or registrar. You can also use the Secretary of State's website, www.sec.state.ri.us. (If you forget the URL, you can always find this and many other useful links on the RIMS website, www.rimed.org.)

If you don't live in Rhode Island, what in-state connection do you have that may be important to your legislators? For example, you may be employed in Rhode Island, have patients here, etc. (When contacting legislators, DON'T pretend you are their constituent if you are not.)

HOW TO BEST CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATOR

A *telephone call to their home* is the most effective means. You may also send a letter to their home, button-hole them at the State House (not easy to do), or send an e-mail. The old adage for a legislator is "Five phone calls on one issue from five different constituents is a wake-up call."

WHAT TO SAY DURING THE CALL

Unless you know them personally, address legislators as "Representative Smith" or "Senator Jones" (NOT "Congressman" or "Congresswoman"; that's somebody else). Tell them who you are, what the issue is, and why it's important to you. If you are calling about a particular piece of legislation, knowing its number helps. Ask what you can do to get the outcome you'd like, and leave your contact information. Be clear, be honest, be helpful. DON'T be a Know-It-All.

TESTIFYING BEFORE A COMMITTEE

If you plan to testify on a bill, know its status and content. You can bone up on both by going to the General Assembly website, www.rilin.state.ri.us. You can verify that your bill is scheduled for a hearing and on a committee's agenda by calling the Speaker's office in the House (222-2466) or the Majority Leader in the Senate (222-6655). In order to testify, CANCEL YOUR APPOINTMENTS for the afternoon and come early. It is hard to find parking, the hearing rooms are notoriously small, and even if your bill will not bring out a large crowd, someone else's bill may. Find the Committee Room and SIGN IN on the witness form for your bill, or you will never be called to testify.

When called, thank them ("Thank you, Mister/Madame Chairman and members of the committee"), identify yourself, state who you are representing, and say right up front if you are speaking for or against the bill. You may bring written testimony with copies for each committee member, but if it's longer than half a page DO NOT read it to them. KEEP IT SHORT. Speak to your knowledge and expertise and how they inform your opinion. Anticipate the arguments of the opposition, and if possible, have a brief reply to them. Again, try to avoid seeming like a Know-It-All. Be helpful, answer the committee members' questions, if any, and remember that knowledge may be influence, but it is not power. The committee members (or at least their leaders) are the ones with the power, including the power to do the wrong thing from your perspective. Thank the committee.

RIMS HAS DECADES OF EXPERIENCE WITH THE LEGISLATURE

More advice is a phone call away:

Steve DeToy, RIMS Public Affairs Director, 401-528-3283.

By Nick Tsiongas, MD, MPH

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