

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS WITH LEGISLATORS

Remember that old adage, “all politics is local”? It’s famous for good reason: because it’s true. Your legislator is responsible for crafting policies that impact you professionally and personally. Once you develop a strong relationship with him or her, they will turn to you for input on matters you are most knowledgeable about and almost always vote the way of those he or she is most close to in their district.

Who is your Legislator?

United States Congress

Every Montana resident is represented in US Congress by two Senators in the Senate and one Representative in the House of Representatives. The terms of the two senators are staggered so that they are not elected in the same year. Montana’s Senators are Steve Daines (R) and Jon Tester (D). Montana currently has two at-large congressional districts that represent the entire state. Representatives Ryan Zinke (R) and Matt Rosendale (R) are Montana’s Representatives. Every ten years, the number of congressional districts is reapportioned based on the state’s population as determined by the [United States Census](#), resulting in the second house seat in 2022, filled by Ryan Zinke.

Montana General Assembly or Montana Legislature

Many people confuse their Members of Congress with their Montana State Legislators, but they are completely different. Every Montana resident is represented in the Montana Legislature by 1 Senator in the Senate and 2 Representatives in the House of Representatives. Both your Senator and your Representatives are determined by the Senate and House district in which you live.

The Montana State Legislature is composed of the 100-member [Montana House of Representatives](#) and the 50-member [Montana Senate](#). Members are limited to serving no more than eight years in either chamber, but the term limit is consecutive, not lifetime. The Montana Legislature meet only on odd numbered years, and for 90 day periods.

Start By Finding Out Who Your State Legislators Are

Go to <https://leg.mt.gov/> and click on the ‘Legislators’ tab along the top of your screen. Once you click this tab, there will be several options for you to search for your legislator. You can search by your address, or if you click the ‘more’ button, the website will redirect you to legislative maps and the Montana Secretary of State’s website.

Outside of a legislative session, the legislative branch *does not* maintain staff or facilities through which constituents may contact their legislators. Instead, constituents may visit his or her website often including contact information. Individual webpages may be found by clicking on a legislator’s name on the [legislative roster](#) on the Montana State Legislator website (linked above). If a website is not provided or active, you may contact your lobbyist for up to date contact information.

Make That First Contact

Send an email or call your legislator. We recommend that you try to meet him/her throughout the interim months (May – November of non-session months) when he/she is less busy with the stress of the legislative session. He/she will have more time to spend with you and learn about your concerns and issues. He/she will nearly always respond outside of session. During session, unless you know him/her well enough, it can be challenging to hear back from him/her directly.

Crafting A Letter

A well-written letter is one of the best ways to let your legislator know your thoughts and opinions about a particular issue. Here are some tips for getting your message across effectively:

- **Be brief.** Legislators have many demands on their time. They appreciate letters that are short and to the point.
- **Put the message in your own words.** Form letters and petitions don't have the same impact as personal, informed opinions.
- Address your letter to a specific legislator or legislators. Depending on your message, you may want to write to the sponsor of a bill, certain members of a committee, or your own legislators. **Don't address your letter to the entire Legislature.**
- **Identify bills** by their number, title, and sponsor when relevant.
- Explain your position on the bill and ask for the legislator's support or opposition.
- Give any sources of information that you use to make your point.
- Include your name, address, and a little about who you are (for example, where you work or what school you attend).

During a Legislative Session Address letters to:

Senator XXXX
Montana Senate
PO Box 200500
Helena, MT 59620-0500

Rep. XXXX
Montana House of Representatives
PO Box 200400
Helena, MT 59620-0400

While we suggest calling in the interim, you can always send an email message like this:

- Hello, my name is name and I live in your district, in town name. I would like to visit with you to discuss some concerns (or ideas) I have. I can be reached at (contact info). Also, I am interested in receiving any newsletters or emails you regularly send to constituents. Can you add me to your list?

****Additional example below***

EXAMPLE INTRODUCTION EMAIL

(Place on letterhead)

Date

Address

Dear Senator/Representative [insert name],

My name is [enter name] and I am the [position, title, entity]. I wanted to take this opportunity to share that [enter Jurisdiction/organization/entity] is a member of [insert association/coalition name] which is a professional organization comprised of thirty-three community-based organizations in Montana that provide residential services, employment, and day activities primarily to children and adults with developmental disabilities . Launched in [insert year], MACDS is committed to providing community services that support individualized choices that are flexible and responsive to identified essential needs. Our goal is to ensure that service providers are strong community businesses providing high quality service choices.

[ENTER ORG NAME] has members across the state, representing [insert percentage of state/counties covered]. Our policy priority agenda serves as a guide in moving [ORG NAME] forward, and is a fluid document which will continue to evolve as MACDS grows and policies continue to change at the state and federal level.

[insert county/municipality, association, entity] decided to join ORG for the following reasons:

- the benefit you see to your community,
- anything related to your jurisdictions' strategic plan around early child care policy
- the role you would like to play locally or statewide
- how you could be a resource for the legislator

I was hoping to sit down and talk more about our community's role with MACDS and how I can serve as a resource to you. We are in the process of solidifying our policy agenda for 2021 and I am happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have. You can reach me at (enter contact info) and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

(Sign)

LEGISLATIVE DO'S AND DON'Ts

- DO:** Get to know your legislator in advance of asking for his/her help. Send emails, letters, or make a phone call introducing yourself.
 - DO:** Invite your legislator to personally visit your department or agency in his/her district.
 - DO:** Be on time for appointments.
 - DO:** Have one chief spokesperson who will manage all discussion during meetings with legislators.
 - DO:** Keep the “bottom line” in mind. Be concise, clear, and to the point in your remarks to legislators. Time is limited.
 - DO:** Be (and sound) convinced of the essential value and importance of your role and the programs you offer in your community. You will never convince anyone else if you are not convinced yourself.
 - DO:** Emphasize local examples of good work by local agencies, and the local impact of any legislation.
 - DO:** Write letters to your legislators. Constituent mail is strongly considered. Letters should be two pages or shorter, with the issue and bill number in the first paragraph.
 - DO:** Leave material with your legislator, and provide information about how to get in touch with you later.
 - DO:** Let your legislator know if you do not know the answer to their question. Tell them you will follow up with the information they requested.
 - DO:** Let Smith and McGowan or Northbound Public Affairs know if your legislator had any questions you were unable to answer or concerns you were unable to address adequately.
 - DO:** Write a thank you note to your legislator for meeting with you, and be sure to thank him/her if s/he supports your position on a bill, or an issue.
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- DON'T:** Mislead or give your legislator false information. If you do so unknowingly, go back and admit your mistake.
- DON'T:** Send form letters; they are usually disregarded.
- DON'T:** Use jargon or acronyms.
- DON'T:** Get drawn into any confrontation with a legislator that appears to be "dead-ended."
- DON'T:** Belittle those who disagree with you. On the next issue, they may be on your side.

AGENCY TOUR DO'S AND DON'Ts

- DO:** Try to use a location where services are provided, and if possible, have a busy waiting room and clinic. If this is not possible, be sure to explain why what they see is different than normal (i.e. staff are just finishing their lunch break and preparing for clients who will start arriving any minute). If your agency does not provide direct services, determine the best way to show the impact of your agency's work.
- DO:** Make sure the front desk staff knows to expect an elected official, are very polite and welcoming, and know who to call and what to do upon arrival.
- DO:** Have one key spokesperson who will do most of the talking.
- DO:** Provide written material with more information, including your name and contact information.
- DO:** Provide a picture of your client's needs, the needs of the community, how far you are able to go in addressing those needs, your greatest accomplishments, your biggest challenges.
- DO:** Allow time for questions and dialogue.
- DO:** Make the connection between your agency and other local agencies AND make sure they know your agency is a member of the statewide association/coalition/local government. Make sure they know who the association/coalition/local government lobbyists are.
- DON'T:** Let numerous people introduce themselves and come in and out during the tour. Decide on 2 – 3 people whose name the official should remember when they leave.
- DON'T:** Plan on talking to the elected official for no more than about 15 minutes before giving him/her the chance to talk, ask questions, etc.
- DON'T:** Sit him/her in a conference room and talk at them or show a slide show exclusively. Make sure they see the facility, the clients, the staff.

Sample Agenda:

- a. Introductions, get to know the legislator and their background and let them know your background.
- b. What does the agency/organization do for the community?
- c. Successes and challenges in the community (talk about the prior legislative session and things at the local level). If applicable, thank them for supporting priority bills previously.
- d. How the successes are funded and how this funding is important to their community.
- e. Next Steps – share priorities and agenda. Let them know Northbound Public Affairs and Smith and McGowan represents you and the legislator can feel free to contact us with any questions.
- f. The Ask (for support, feedback or guidance).

PREPARING TO TESTIFY

Parking:

The Montana State Capitol is located at 1301 E. Sixth Avenue. Parking is available on residential streets surrounding the building.

How to enter the building:

You can enter the building on the North or South side, entering on the ground floor.

I'm in the right place. Now what?

You will need to sign-in to testify. There will be a clipboard on the "witness table" near the front of the room. Make sure you are signing up for the correct bill. Each bill will have its own sheet and the bill number will be listed at the top of the sheet. You will be asked to provide your name, address, phone number and position. Because the legislative process is a public process, the information you provide will be available to the public. Your lobbyist will ensure this takes place.

I'm signed in. What should I expect in the hearing?

Depending on the popularity (positive or negative) of the bill, the hearing may go quickly or take a long time. You are free to leave after you testify or you can stay, it's up to you.

Your testimony should be succinct and to the point on the issues relevant to the bill. We encourage you to express your thoughts in two minutes or less. If the hearing draws a large crowd of witnesses, the chair of the committee will typically limit testimony so it's a good idea to get in the practice of delivering a sharp, polished, testimony. It's a good idea to write down your testimony or talking points so you have organized, complete thoughts. If you would like us to look over your testimony, we are happy to do so.

There is a process for the interaction between you and the committee members. Please follow these guidelines:

- The Chair will ask you to state your name, who you represent, and proceed with your comments. You will not be introduced, so please take this opportunity to establish yourself as appropriate. Begin your testimony by addressing the chair, "Madam/Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to testify on (bill number)." "I am here today representing (organization name) in support/opposition of (bill number)."
- After your comments, the committee may ask you questions. If you don't know the answer, say so and state that you will find the answer and get back to them. Then you can get back to them via one of the Smith and McGowan/Northbound Public Affairs lobbyists or call them yourself.
- If you are asked a question, you must be called upon to respond by the Chair before you reply. This is because the hearing is being recorded and there are people who may be listening online and they'll want to know who is speaking. Watch how this works for witnesses before you.
- Once there are no more questions, the chair will thank you and your testimony is over and you can return to your seat.

Zoom Testimony

All above noted recommendations apply when testifying via zoom. If you choose to testify via zoom you will need to:

- Sign up ahead of time (generally within 48 hours of bill hearing) on the legislative website.
- Submit your written testimony via the form provided online.
- Keep in mind that your written statements become public documents and will be made available for anyone to see or request.
- You will be placed in a waiting room upon logging into the zoom call.
- Staff or the committee chair will move you into the meeting when it is your turn to testify.
- Committee members and the audience will be able to hear you but will not see you on screen.
- Be sure to speak into your microphone clearly and slowly.