

Helpful hints in building a relationship with your Legislator and Policymakers

Always be honest.

Gaining trust is critical in building a relationship with your legislators and public policymakers. Honesty is an essential component of creating that trusting relationship.

Example:

Speaking to a group of disability advocates, a state legislator described a situation in which someone was speaking to her regarding a bill that was being considered in the House of Representatives. She later learned that information given to her by this individual was false. She said that she will never be able to trust that person again.

On a related note, do not exaggerate to make your situation seem more critical than it is.

If you exaggerate in explaining a situation to a legislator or policymaker for the purpose of enlisting his or her support and later he or she learns the true circumstances, you will likely lose the legislator's trust and it may be impossible for you to regain a trusting relationship.

If you don't know, say so.

If you are asked a question and do not know the answer, tell the legislator that you don't know. But add that you would be happy to look into the issue and provide the answer as soon as possible.

Be polite when you're talking to legislators or policy-makers.

Sometimes, an issue may be so important to us that we are very passionate when discussing it. Passion for the topic is positive. However, do not cross the boundary of politeness by being too aggressive or not showing respect.

If you are unhappy with the legislator's or policymaker's response to an issue, express disagreement but do not become hostile or threatening.

Be a good listener.

Do not interrupt when the legislator or policymaker is speaking. Pay attention to the information being shared – it may prove to be very valuable.

Do not put down, criticize, or poke fun of people who may have a different point of view than yours. Focus on the issues.

A positive presentation of your ideas is best. Keep the issue foremost and avoid badmouthing other people or groups.

Express appreciation to the legislator or policymaker for taking the time to talk to you.

We are all busy persons and our legislators and policymakers are particularly busy and have limited time. They will appreciate, like we all do, acknowledgement of their time and attention.

Write a follow-up postcard.

Send a postcard to thank the legislator for the opportunity to visit and talk to him or her. If there were questions asked during your meeting that you were not able to answer, you may want to write a letter or send an email.

Work on building a relationship with legislators' staff.

In order to make appointments with our legislators and policymakers, we often need to work through their secretaries or other staff. Use these opportunities to get to know these staff. When talking to them, be sure to thank them for their assistance. Show appreciation for the staff's helpfulness.