

Effective Advocacy with Members of Congress



AMERICAN COUNSELING ASSOCIATION

Office of Public Policy and Legislation

5999 Stevenson Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22304
(703) 823-9800 / (800) 347-6647

www.counseling.org/publicpolicy

ACA Legislative Action Center:
capwiz.com/counseling/home

Members of Congress Won't Work on Counseling Issues Unless You Ask Them To!

The Information Age has changed our entire society, including the policymaking process. Communicating with each other is incredibly easy, and the "computerization" of communication has had a dramatic, fundamental effect on legislative advocacy.

There are an unbelievable set of demands placed on Representatives and Senators in work on legislative policy issues, constituent services, public availability, and campaigning. Members of Congress won't know how to represent counselors' interests unless counselors tell them how to do this, and there are more than enough other interest groups clamoring for their time and attention to keep them busy if counselors don't speak up. Communicating with members of Congress doesn't always—or even usually—yield the desired results, but it's the only way to make policy changes happen.

A few basic rules apply for all forms of communicating, whether via face-to-face meetings, phone calls, e-mails, or letters:

- **Contact *your* Representative and Senators**
- **Be brief**
- **Focus on only one issue in each communication**
- **Ask for something specific**
- **Keep a copy of your e-mail or letter for future reference**
- **Follow up.**

Keep these rules in mind—and be professional and persistent—and you may be surprised at the results! Even if you've never talked or written to a legislator before, you probably already have all the skills you need to advocate effectively for yourself and the counseling profession. Ultimately, effective advocacy is about establishing a relationship with the member of Congress, or more likely, the staff person for the member of Congress who handles the issues you care about. Who is better trained than counselors to do this?

You *are* listened to, more than anyone else!

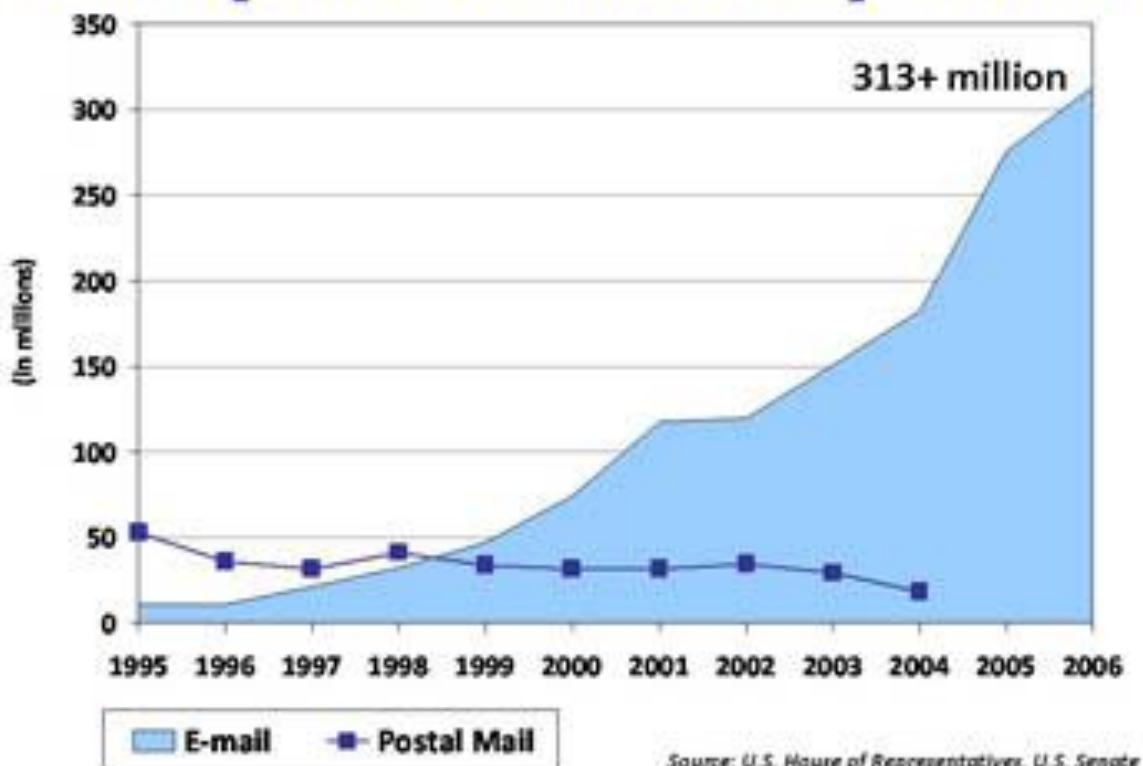
The flood of e-mails coming in to congressional offices has made it extraordinarily difficult for members to actually hear what their constituents are saying. Representatives and Senators have always been hungry for good information about what's happening in their district, and to know what their constituents care about. Now, though, it's become very hard for them to ferret this out amid all of the noise.

There are two trends you should understand which provide the framework for considering legislative advocacy.

The first is that congressional offices are absolutely flooded with e-mail messages. As shown in recent reports by the Congressional Management Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping congressional offices function more effectively, there are more than 300 million e-mail messages sent to Capitol Hill each year. The Congressional Management Foundation has several reports describing the current state of communications between citizens and congressional offices, which can be found on their website at <http://www.cmfweb.org>.

A chart showing the sharp, steady increase in communications, from data compiled by CMF, looks like one half of a mountain in the Himalayas:

Correspondence Floods Capitol Hill



Source: Congressional Management Foundation, 2008.

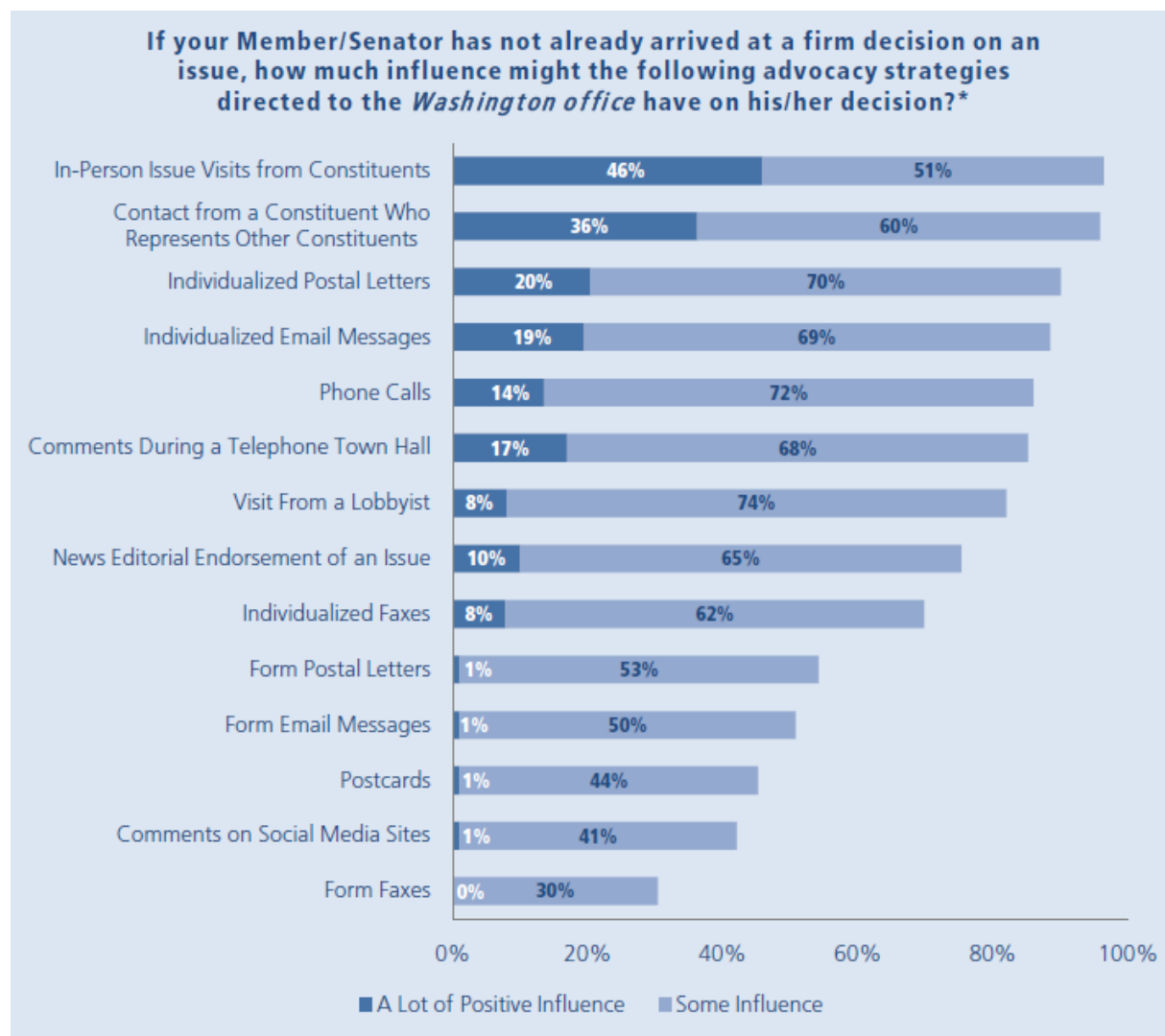
That's the first trend: a roughly 600% increase in the number of constituent contacts offices are receiving.

The second trend is more of a non-trend: **the number of staff members working for congressional offices, in both the House and the Senate, has stayed virtually the same since the 1970's!** Despite U.S. population growth over the past four decades, and despite the advent of the home computer and the internet, congressional offices have the same number of people available to handle the work.

Back in the 1970's, 80's, and 90's, organizations and interest groups frequently tried to increase the quantity of letters and calls coming into congressional offices, in the hopes that more = better. Many organizations continued operating this way once e-mail became prevalent, and form e-mail messages took the place of form letters and pre-printed advocacy postcards as a grassroots campaign strategy. The flood of e-mails, and particularly the use of form e-mails—in which constituents are sending the same e-mail text to the office on a particular topic—has led congressional staff to substantially devalue identical form e-mails.

At the same time, though, the flood of form e-mails has made individualized e-mail messages and letters written in the constituent's own words that much more valuable. Today, **quality is much more important than quantity**. Today, better = better.

Here's another chart from the Congressional Management Foundation, in which congressional staff rate the impact of various forms of communication.



Source: *Communicating with Congress: Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2011, p3.

The above chart shows that a single individualized e-mail message, written in the constituent's own words, is twice as likely to have "a lot of positive influence" on a member's position than a visit from a lobbyist. Faced with the deluge of contacts they're getting, congressional offices are engaged in information triage: the more time and effort it took a constituent to share their concern, the more deeply they are believed to care about the issue, and the more their opinion will be listened to. Constituent contacts work, but if they're going to make an impact they have to be high quality.

High quality contacts do *not* need to include detailed policy research, survey data, and case histories. They *do* need to be in your own words, and include your reasons for supporting or opposing the legislation you're writing about, and if possible, information on how the bill in question would impact your district or state.

With this frame of reference in mind, here are six basic rules for contacting your members of Congress.

Contact *your* Representative and Senators

You can identify your members of Congress via ACA's internet action website, at <http://capwiz.com/counseling>, through the U.S. Senate website at www.senate.gov, and through the U.S. House of Representatives website at www.house.gov.

It does not matter if you voted in the last election, or who you voted for. They won't know, and they won't check. All that matters is that you have a postal address (for either your home or office) that is inside their district or state. Make sure you leave your name and address with the office, even if you're simply calling the member of Congress; without a name and address the office won't be able to send you a response from the Senator or Representative.

Letters or e-mails sent to someone besides your Representative or your Senator will be forwarded to the person who *is* your Representative or Senator. Congressional offices have a hard enough time staying on top of their own constituent's mail to bother responding to someone they don't represent!

Be brief

Neither members of Congress nor their staff have time to read long letters or e-mails from constituents. Letters should be kept to one page—and one side of one page—if possible. Similarly, keep e-mail messages to no more than two to four short paragraphs.

Focus on only one issue in each communication

Looking at the first graph on page 3, it shouldn't surprise you to learn that if you send a letter or e-mail to a congressional office raising two or three different issues, the

congressional office is going to pick the one issue they have a form response letter already written on, and respond to you with that. Offices simply don't have the time to write detailed personal letters and e-mails combining various issue responses together into one new custom-made response for each constituent.

If you want to make sure you're heard on an issue, stay focused on that issue.

Ask for something specific

If you don't ask for something specific, there's no way you'll be able to tell later if the member of Congress did what you wanted. If you contact a Representative or Senator and say "I want more federal support for school counselors," you're likely to get a letter or e-mail back saying something like

"School counselors are great! I support school counselors and the valuable work that they do. In fact, I cosponsored 'National School Counseling Week' legislation in honor of the profession. Thanks for writing; I'll keep your views in mind during my further work."

What have you asked your member of Congress to do? Pretty much nothing.

If instead you tell them "Please cosign the letter being organized by Senator Jones in support of \$60 million for the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program," you'll be able to go back and check—did the Senator cosign the letter, or not?

The only way you'll be able to hold them accountable is if you ask them to take specific, verifiable, concrete action of some sort.

Keep a copy of your e-mail or letter for future reference

E-mails and letters get lost, including for congressional offices. Think about how many e-mails *you* manage to lose track of over the course of a month or a year, and then think about the difficulty of keeping track of more than 300 *million* e-mails!

Regardless of how you contact an office, keeping a copy of the contact and the date that you sent it will make it easy for you to go back later and remind yourself of what you said and when you said it. It will also make it easy for you to reconnect with the office later, if necessary, if you don't hear back from them within three or four weeks.

Follow up

The squeaky wheel gets the grease. Most people don't contact their members of Congress, and most people who do contact their members of Congress don't follow up with them once they get a response. Often, congressional offices send back relatively non-committal form letters back to constituents ("Thanks for writing to me about

Medicare. I like Medicare, and am working to protect it. Sincerely....”). The constituent thinks their voice has been heard, and leaves it at that.

If you wrote your Representative about Medicare coverage of mental health providers, and specifically about Medicare coverage of licensed professional counselors, and even *more* specifically about the Representative cosponsoring H.R. 1234, legislation to establish Medicare coverage of LPCs, then the generic “I support Medicare” response isn’t a really a response. You’ve asked for specific action, and your legislator hasn’t told you whether or not she’s going to do what you requested.

In this situation, you should cordially reply back, and say that while you appreciated hearing back from the Representative about Medicare policy in general, you’d like her to cosponsor H.R. 1234 in order to improve Medicare beneficiaries’ access to outpatient mental health services. By taking the time to contact the Representative again, and not settling for getting a generic form letter response, you’ve just leapfrogged over thousands of other constituent contacts in demonstrating how much you care about this issue. If individualized e-mails carry more weight than form e-mails (as shown in the chart on page 4), then think about how much *more* weight a second contact on the same topic carries!

Your goal is to push the legislator to take, or not take, the specific action you’re requesting. If your legislator writes back saying that she is choosing not to cosponsor the legislation, you’ve at least done what you can.

Logistics

All Representatives’ and Senators’ offices can be reached by calling the U.S. Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121 or (202) 225-3121. When you call this number, an operator will pick up the line, and wait for you to indicate which office you want to be connected to. If you don’t know who your Senators and Representative are, take a moment to identify them first so you know which office to ask for.

The websites for your members of Congress can be found through www.senate.gov and www.house.gov.

Postal letters should be addressed as follows:

For Senators

The Honorable {full name}
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

For House members

The Honorable {full name}
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator {last name}:

Dear Congressman/Congresswoman {last name}:

Thank you for taking the time to get involved! Should you have any questions, contact Scott Barstow with ACA at sbarstow@counseling.org.