

Disability Advocacy Day: An Opportunity To Advocate! | CPD Blog

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This year marks the first annual Disability Advocacy Day in Utah. This event is sponsored by the Utah Developmental Disabilities Network which includes the [USU Center for Persons with Disabilities](#), the [Utah Developmental Disabilities Council](#), the [Disability Law Center](#) and the [Utah Parent Center](#).

Disability Advocacy Day is an opportunity to highlight the issues facing individuals with disabilities and their families in Utah. This event also highlights the importance of the many organizations and programs that advocate for and support the needs of people with disabilities and their families. As part of Disability Advocacy Day, we have been providing training to families and individuals with disabilities about effective strategies to communicate with legislators and other policymakers, and this blog post will cover some of the basic strategies for meeting with and sharing your concerns with your elected representatives.

It is important that individuals with disabilities be empowered to advocate for themselves! It is vitally important that legislators hear from the people who are directly affected by policy proposals and who receive services through the many disability programs that are funded by the State of Utah. Reaching out to legislators helps your elected representative more clearly understand your concerns, and it allows you to explain how a proposed new law or regulation would impact you personally. If you run a disability provider agency or another support program, meeting with legislators allows you to share the impact and importance of your programs, and it can provide an opportunity to showcase the services you provide and the people you employ and serve.

Ways To Meet With Your Legislator

Although you can always write an email or call your legislator, one of the most effective methods for sharing your concerns is to meet with them in person. There are two main methods for having face-to-face meetings with legislators. One is a **legislative visit**, where you visit the legislator's office for a meeting. The other is a **site visit**, where you invite the legislator and his/her staff to attend a community event, or to tour your program. Regardless of the form the visit takes, meeting with legislators is part of building an ongoing relationship with your elected representatives.

The following information is meant to serve as a guide to assist you in scheduling, planning, and conducting a legislative visit. Great emphasis is placed in preparing and delivering a cohesive and clear message. The steps outlined here are suggestions for setting the stage for a successful visit with your legislators.

The organizations that make up the DD Network are an important resource for policymakers and agency administrators who want to make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities and their families. The Utah Developmental Disabilities Network supports individuals with disabilities and their families by ensuring that state and local government agencies, community providers, nonprofit organizations, schools, professionals, families, and most importantly, individuals with disabilities have access to the support, training, and most up-to-date information on disability issues in Utah and the nation.

Determine whom to contact. The Utah Legislature is comprised of 75 House Districts and 29 Senate districts. You can find your legislators by visiting the [Utah Legislature's website](#) and entering your address and zip code.

You will be directed to all the names and contact information for the state legislators in your district. Call your legislator's nearest local office. While in session, legislators are usually at their Capitol office. It's usually more convenient for you

to visit the legislator's district office nearest you, but if you prefer, you can visit their Capitol office during the legislative session. You can find a schedule of the upcoming legislative session on the [Utah Legislature's website](#). Click on the "Calendar" link in the bottom center of the page.

<h3>When You Call Your Legislator's Office</h3>

1. Identify yourself and briefly introduce yourself as a constituent and voter.
2. Explain why you want to visit and ask to set up a time to come in to speak with the legislator either in the district or Capitol office.
3. If the legislator is unavailable, meeting with staff members is also a great opportunity as they play important roles in shaping priorities. More than likely, you will meet with the staff person who covers health and/or education issues.
4. If meeting with the senator or representative, you may be asked to send a written request for the visit. Send a written request, if necessary.

Many offices will request a letter. The letter needs to include who will be part of the visit – names and affiliations – and a short description of why you want to meet with the legislator. If possible, it's a good idea to personalize the issue you wish to meet about through a compelling personal story. Always refer to your legislator as "The Honorable (Name)" in addressing the envelope and the letter. In the salutation, write: "Dear Senator," "Dear Congressman," "Dear Congresswoman," or "Dear Representative" so your message doesn't look like junk mail.

All planning for a legislative visit should center around crafting a clear and concise message. Clearly identify a problem and purpose for visiting with your legislator. It could simply be a meeting to get to know one another. You don't have to wait until there is a pressing issue, and a visit doesn't have to be just about advocating for a specific piece of legislation. Often the most valuable visits are those where you educate and inform policymakers on how specific programs or policies are working for you.

It is critical to develop a uniform message so your legislator walks away with a greater understanding of the impact of a proposed policy on you and your family. Your message should define your issue; explain why it is important to you; and describe how policymakers can help. Your message should include specific examples of how a specific issue or policy impacts you and your family, through personal stories and experiences.

<h3>Prepare Materials</h3>

Prepare a one-page fact sheet about your specific issue, highlighting the message you want the legislator to understand. This fact sheet should be concise, but clear about your issue and its impact on you and your family. Although not necessary, you may also wish to bring additional supporting information like position papers, editorials, and/or fact sheets about the particular legislation/issue you are advocating for. You should also remember to give your legislator your business card, or a contact sheet, so they can follow up with you if they have additional questions after your visit.

<h3>Strategize Cooperatively</h3>

If you are visiting with a group, you should take the time before the visit to formulate a strategy with everyone attending the meeting. You want to appear professional and coordinated in your messaging, so you should:

1. Decide who will make what points.
2. Have facts lined up prior to the meeting.
3. Keep focused on the issue you requested to meet about.
4. Be prepared for questions, and think through possible solutions.

Be punctual and friendly.

Legislators and staff are just as busy as you, so be sure to arrive on time for your visit. Greet the legislator and/or staff representative with a firm handshake and thank them for their time. Introduce yourself by giving your name and allow other members of your group to introduce themselves. Hand your business card to each of the people with whom you are meeting.

<h3>Deliver Your Message</h3>

All written materials and participants must be prepared in advance to "be on message" with the central theme of the day to ensure the focus stays where it is most needed. Stay positive and suggest solutions. Encourage your legislator to work with people in your community and/or your organization to find a solution.

<h3>Ask For A Commitment</h3>

Ask the legislator directly about his or her willingness to support your issue or request. Identify points for follow-up and invite the legislator and staff to contact you if they have additional questions, or if they need additional information. What happens when issues are raised that you did not expect? Answer directly if you know the topic and can speak to the issues. If you don't know, it's OK to tell them so and offer to get back to them with the information.

Tips For Communicating With The Legislator

- Know your legislator. Review his/her biography. Learn their party affiliation, committee and subcommittee membership, and past record on the issue you will be discussing. Knowing these facts will help guide your discussion and demonstrate that you have adequately prepared for the visit.
- Remember: You're the expert! Legislators and staff usually know little or nothing about your day-to-day experience and the impact of specific policies on the lives of their constituents. Be sure to explain all acronyms, programs, funding sources, and which agencies administer the funds that support your programs.
- Get Personal: Put a community face on the issue. Legislators want to represent the best interests of their district or state. Wherever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the legislator's constituency.

Immediately after the visit. Follow up with a thank you letter outlining the points covered during the meeting, and include any additional information that was requested.

On-going Efforts

Send reports and newspaper articles relevant to your issue in Utah and elsewhere to your legislator. Ask others – friends, family members, school personnel, community members, religious and business leaders, and neighbors – to write letters to the legislator that support your position.

A Legislative Visit Should Not Be A One-time Event

The more often you visit legislators, the more comfortable you will get with the process. The most important element in visits with legislators is establishing a personal connection that will continue in the future. In order to maximize effectiveness, you should have a plan that fits into a more extensive advocacy agenda. When your legislator is called upon to show leadership for disability related issues, he/she may draw upon their knowledge and impressions gleaned during their visit with you and other advocates.

Hopefully this information is helpful! We encourage you to get involved and make a difference. You can do it!