

## **Tips for Working with Elected and Appointed Officials**

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As Cooperative Extension employees, we are all responsible for communicating the value of our work and that of the organization to various audiences. Sometimes those audiences include local, county, state, and/or federal officials who may directly or indirectly impact our funding. Developing positive relationships and communicating effectively with elected or appointed officials is an important aspect of communicating value. These tips are designed to help you do just that.

### **Foster positive working relationships with elected officials and their staff.**

- Contact officials and staff on a consistent basis, not just during budget cycles. Develop and nurture relationships all year.
- When contacting elected officials, in-person visits are most effective followed by phone calls, handwritten notes, and finally typed letters or personalized emails. Simply forwarding mass emails may be ineffective or counterproductive.
- Get to know staffers and aides. Offer to be a resource on specific issues. Staffers and aides are valuable contacts and have a great deal of influence on decisions.
- When officials or their staff members call for information, **return the call immediately**, if possible. They most likely need information in a timely manner.
- Make an appointment to visit your elected officials or visit during office hours. If possible, bring along clients, volunteers and friends who are also their constituents.

### **Send elected officials good news.**

- Place elected officials on mailing lists for newsletters, annual reports, special events, etc. They want to hear from Cooperative Extension in good times and in bad.
- Make sure written materials are one page only.
- Call or visit elected officials periodically. Share positive outcomes.

### **Share bad news as well: no surprises.**

- Communicate good and bad news directly to elected officials before they read it online or in the newspapers. Share both good and bad information as soon as possible to avoid negative surprises.
- Be judicious. Assume that whatever you put in writing will be shared.

### **Ask elected officials for their support, if needed.**

After discussing the major issues, look for common ground. Then be sure to ask if the elected official can support your proposal. Each response will require a specific strategy.

- If the response is **no**, determine if their negative response is fixed or adjustable. If there is room for influence, create a strategy that may sway their decision. If their negative response is firm, it may be best to focus on people you may influence. Never close the door completely. The elected official may eventually come around on another issue at another time.
- If the response is **I don't know at this time**, follow up with a question that provides more information to positively influence their decision. For example, you could ask, "Do you need more data on participants or a particular program?" Please provide requested information in a timely fashion.
- If their response is **yes**, thank them and ask them to help create a winning strategy that will influence their colleagues and determine which specific message points work best with the elected officials who need convincing.

### **Serve as a resource.**

Elected officials look for impartial sources of information on the issues they are considering. UW Colleges and UW-Extension expertise, backed by UW System research, is highly valued.

### **Develop a one-page fact sheet.**

- Condense materials to one page.
- Develop a simple explanation of the topic and attend the meeting prepared to deliver three simple message points. The elected official is juggling many issues and, in order to be successful, it is important to deliver a simple message.
- After educating elected officials, you can provide more complex information. If you want them to take action, ask them specifically what they can do to help.
- Make sure the fact sheet contains our logo and name, proper title and phone number of the contact person.
- Include social media and website addresses when possible.

### **Invite elected officials to events.**

- Designate elected officials as “honorary guests” at high-profile special events.
- Incorporate them in ceremonies, such as handing out awards, speaking, etc.
- Invite the media and inform officials that the media are invited.
- Invite them to take part in your programming, serving as judges, coaches, presenters, etc.

### **Ask clients and supporters to speak on our behalf.**

Elected officials appreciate hearing from constituents and other spokespersons. Consider asking clients, volunteers, and friends to:

- Contact their elected officials. Our friends, clients and supporters can provide first-hand knowledge about the value of our work.
- Interview local or state elected officials about their legislative and other interests, thoughts about government, etc. This interview process can help connect their interests with our programs and services.
- Encourage our clients and supporters to write letters to the editor and op-ed pieces. These allow people to speak out on our behalf and reach a large audience at one time.

### **Know the difference between education and advocacy.**

When communicating with elected officials, be clear whether the topic is professional or personal.

- You can make contacts on issues directly related to your job or professional expertise using UW System time and resources, such as letterhead. Do not communicate with any legislator (other than your own) on more than five issues in a six-month period. More than that is seen as lobbying. Please contact the UW Colleges and UW-Extension [Government Relations staff](#) if you have questions.
- Contact with elected officials about issues not directly related to your job should ***never*** be done on state time or using state resources, including computers, phones and letterhead.

### **Resources**

[UW Colleges and UW-Extension Government Relations website](#)  
[Cooperative Extension Communicating Value through Relationships site](#)

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