

Part 3: What Can I Do?



VOTE!

Our government was founded on democratic principles; on the idea that everyone has an equal voice, through their votes, in the direction our society takes. Over the years, that right has become more truly universal. African-American men were given the right to vote in 1870 with the passage of the 15th Amendment; women were given the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. In 1924, the Indian Citizenship Act provided for suffrage for Native Americans. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was enacted to overturn decades of racial discrimination; and in 1971, the 26th Amendment gave 18 year olds the right to vote. Additionally, poll taxes, restrictions on property ownership, and other barriers to voting have all melted away over the years. In 1995, the “Motor Voter” bill made it easier than ever for people to register to vote. Many people have worked very hard and taken significant risks to ensure we have the right to vote.

Ironically, although voting has been made possible for more and more people in the United States, fewer and fewer Americans are actually exercising that right. It's a puzzle — voter registration in the United States is at an all-time high but voter participation is nearing an all-time low. In the 1964 presidential elections 69.3 percent of the voting age population cast a ballot. In 2002, that number was only 54.7 percent, up 0.3 percent from 1996. The numbers for midterm elections are worse. During the midterm election in 1998, only 36.4 percent of the voting age population made it to the polls. Compare that figure with democracies in Europe, which consistently have voter turnout rates of 70, 80, or even 90%. As Americans we like to pride ourselves on being part of the world's leading democracy, but that claim becomes a bit hollow in the face of these statistics. In fact, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Singapore, Switzerland, Uruguay and others have laws on the books that require their citizens to vote and they enforce those laws. Penalties range from fines to disfranchisement for repeat offenders.

Our votes can and do change history. They have consequences we may not have ever imagined. And as long as many people who could vote don't, many possibilities will remain unrealized.

So, what can you do? First, you can vote!

Grassroots: Educate, Advocate and Activate

When all is said and done, there is absolutely no substitute for the kind of “grassroots” advocacy that educates and activates a legislator’s constituents to action. As we have seen, legislators almost always have an “ear to the ground” when it comes to issues their constituents are concerned with or feel strongly about. One of the primary goals of grassroots advocacy is to increase the level of knowledge among the people of Iowa and to motivate them to voice their views and opinions to their representatives.

This toolkit offers many ways for individuals and groups of concerned people to get their voices heard by our lawmakers.

Light Your Candle

So many people feel so overwhelmed and disempowered by the stresses of modern life that they convince themselves they can't make a difference. So they don't even try. They bury their talents in the ground and let their spirits wither on the vine of life. I hope they will bestir themselves at least to say every day as an anonymous old man did: "I don't have the answers, life is not easy, but my heart is in the right place."

It is so important not to let ourselves off the hook or to become apathetic or cynical by telling ourselves that nothing works or makes a difference. Every day, light your small candle. Tutor or mentor or speak to or smile at that one child – your own or one you teach or serve in some way. Every election, take the time to vote for leaders who put children first and against those who don't. Every month decide to write a letter to the editor and to your representatives about a need children have in your community.

The inaction and actions of many human beings over a long time contributed to the crises our children face, and it is the action and struggle of many human beings over time that will solve them. So every day, light your small candle. It just might be the one that sparks the movement to save our children's and nation's future.

Adapted from the writings of Marian Wright Edelman, Founder of the Children's Defense Fund

Getting in Touch

Find out who represents you.

To find out who your representatives are, visit www.legis.state.ia.us. At the home page, scroll about halfway down the page to the heading, "Legislators." Click on "Find Your Legislators." You will be asked for your address including zip code. This will give you both your federal legislators' and your state legislators' names and contact information.

Contact your legislators!

Now that you know where to reach them, go talk to them, write them, email them, or visit them.

State Legislators

Throughout the year, Iowans have the right and the opportunity to contact their state elected officials. State representatives in Iowa live in districts with approximately 30,000 residents, and state senators live in districts only twice that size. They are at the capitol only four months out of the year (January through April), and they come home each weekend, usually having a number of forums during the legislative session to update constituents on legislative activities. The rest of the year they live and work in their legislative districts, and they continue to respond to constituents throughout the year.

Getting legislators to become supporters or advocates of a particular policy requires the following:

- Building positive relationships with them throughout the year
- Providing them information, particularly with respect to local impact, showing the importance of the issue and the role of state government in addressing it
- Showing that there is a constituency that supports an idea and will appreciate the legislator's work on it
- Giving them the opportunity to show their support to that constituency
- Keeping in contact, over time, on the issue

Federal Legislators

Iowans also have the right and opportunity to contact their Congressional representatives. Iowa has five Congressional districts, each with a little less than 600,000 people in population. Iowa also has two U.S. Senators. It is possible to meet directly with your Congressperson, but it usually takes significant time and effort to set up meetings with Congresspeople themselves. They spend most of their time at the U.S. Capitol, although they do commute home to Iowa on many weekends and have Congressional breaks that allow them to spend more extended time in their districts. Most Congresspeople hold periodic town meetings or appear at other events in their districts, and that is a time for direct contact.

In addition, there are local Congressional offices for each Congressperson, designed to help constituents and hear constituent concerns and views. Congresspeople also can be contacted at their Washington, D.C. offices. While state legislators do not have full-time, year-round staff, Congresspeople have extensive staff and must rely upon those staff for much of their information. Therefore, establishing good relationships with Congressional staff is important to making issues known. This requires knowing which staff are responsible for the specific issue of concern.

Phone numbers:

Senate operator: 202-224-3121

House operator: 202-225-3121

White House

Switchboard: 202-456-1414

Comment line: 202-456-1111

Get Informed

Track Legislation

Following legislation that is pertinent to your areas of interest and advocacy is one of the first steps in becoming a good advocate. Knowing what is actually being addressed (and what is not) allows you to be specific in your requests of legislators.

- www.legis.state.ia.us
- In the left-hand column of the web page, you will find a Track Legislation button. This will allow you to track legislation by subject, bill number, committee, etc. and to follow things that are important to you.
- You can also subscribe to listserves that will give you periodic updates during session and the interim on what committees are doing: www.legis.state.ia.us/maillist/

Attend Committee Meetings and Public Hearings

The legislative process in the state of Iowa is open to the public. All committee meetings, hearings, and floor debate is open for the public to attend. Sitting in on these activities provides insight that you will not get in any other way. When you are going to be at the Capitol, plan on attending committee meetings that are pertinent to your areas of interest and observing floor action from the galleries.

Get Information Directly from Your Legislators

Most legislators have an email listserve that they use in sending out weekly “letters” during the session. You can email your legislator and let him or her know you would like to be included in updates.

Attend Forums and Town Hall Meetings in Your Community

Legislators participate in many forums in their district on weekends during the legislative session. These are a good opportunity to hear what your legislators have to say as well as to ask questions and build a relationship.

Advocacy Activities

Writing Letters

Writing letters to your legislators is a great way to get your message across in a personal and sincere way. Keep in mind:

- Use stationary if possible. Typed letters are easier to read than handwritten letters, but a clear, easy-to-read hand written letter is more personal and will get more attention.
- Make sure that a return address is included in the letter.
- Be sure to identify yourself, your place of residence, and the particular issue or bill in which you are interested.
- Individualize your letter using your own words even if you get started with a template or format being used by a group of advocates. Form letter receive far less attention and time.
- Be specific, factual, and state the evidence for your position.
- Refer to bills by name, number, and its status if you can. State clearly your position and what you expect the legislator to do.
- The letter should be no more than one typewritten page in length.

Mailing address for Iowa Legislature:

The Honorable _____(name)
Iowa Senate/House of Representatives (whichever fits)
State Capitol
Des Moines, IA 50319

Calling

Sometimes, a well-timed phone call to your legislator can make all the difference. Be sure to list the points you want to make before you call. When you call, state your name, where you live, your positions, and ask to speak with your legislator. If you are able to speak with the legislator, try to be brief and to the point. Don't forget to thank the legislator for their time. If the legislator is unavailable, ask to leave a message with the clerk or on voicemail. Make sure you leave the bill number you are interested in and state your support or opposition to it before you hang up.

Phone numbers for the Iowa Legislature:

Senate switchboard: 515-281-3371

House switchboard: 515-281-3221

E-Mail

Although e-mailing is sometimes impersonal and less effective than face-to-face conversation, it does serve a purpose in communicating with legislators, particularly when the issue is time-sensitive. E-mail messages should be fairly brief, referencing a bill number or specific issue. They should include the same information as a letter in terms of who you are and your contact information. E-mail messages are also sometimes a nice way to thank your legislator for particular votes or other action.

E-mail address format for Iowa Legislators:

Firstname.Lastname@legis.state.ia.us

Meeting in Person at the Capitol

Meeting with your legislators in person is perhaps the most effective way to advocate. Keep in mind that a meeting at the Capitol during legislative session is likely to be brief, so be prepared.

- Make an appointment ahead of time if possible. Legislators are busy people with many demands on their time.
- If you are unable to make an appointment ahead of time, try to get to the Capitol early in the day to let your legislator know you are there. Go to the main door of the chamber (House or Senate) and fill out a message slip (See Examples in Section 9). Wait in the Rotunda area for either the legislator, the legislator's clerk who can tell you when he or she will be available, or a page who will tell you he or she is currently unavailable. This is when your relationship with the legislator comes in handy – if he or she recognizes your name (or if the clerk does), you are much more likely to get at least a few minutes of his or her time.
- If a meeting cannot be scheduled, it is still likely that the legislator can squeeze you in for a few minutes between meetings or floor debate and voting.
- Have your notes ready and rehearse the most efficient way to get your message across.
- Make your case as clearly as possible and tell the legislator exactly what you would like him or her to do.
- Thank the legislator for his or her time.
- Send a note of thanks and reiterate your point once you've returned home.

Meeting in Person Away from the Capitol

Legislators spend most weekends as well as the interim at home in their districts. These are the ideal times for building relationships with your legislators. It is much more likely that you can schedule a meeting with your legislator at home than at the Capitol. However, the same kinds of tips are effective in a meeting with fewer time constraints as for those with more.

Engage Legislators

There are many effective things you can do to let people know how much your program or initiative helps children and families in your community.

It is important to send legislators written invitations to any and all events. Even if they can't attend, the message will get across that child and family issues are prominent on the public agenda. Below is a list of things you can do:

- Ask your state representatives to attend the opening of new facilities or agencies. Ask them to say a few words on the subject.
- Organize a forum on children and family issues in your county. Ask prominent activists, business leaders, parents, and state representatives to participate. The forum can be advertised on community bulletin boards, in local newspapers, radio, and television stations.
- Invite legislators and neighbors to an informal "coffee and conversation" at your home. Tell the legislator the gathering is an opportunity for him or her to get to know constituents and that you are interested in hearing their views on children and family issues.
- Show off! Ask your state representatives, business and faith leaders to visit your center, home or program. Organizing an open house or tour is a public awareness and advocacy initiative that moves community leaders, elected officials, clergy, and other community members out of their offices, boardrooms and legislative chambers and into the real world of children and families. By visiting sites throughout your community, the tour personalizes children and moves local leaders to action.

Be The Expert

Although it seems legislators are super-intelligent, all-knowing people, that is not the case. The information legislators have outside of their experience and knowledge as someone who has lived and worked in the community comes directly from people like you. For example, someone who has worked in the insurance industry is not likely to be well-versed in issues regarding child welfare. However, you can help with that. Building a relationship with your legislators allows them to see you as an expert and they will look to you for answers and information.

Providing Testimony

Typically, you must be invited to testify before a committee or subcommittee, but you should be proactive about getting that invitation. To show your interest, you can:

- Show your support. Write a letter in support of the bill to the committee members indicating your interest in working with the committee on the bill and your interest in providing testimony.
- Contact the committee. Contact the staff of the committee with jurisdiction as soon as you learn that hearings are scheduled to take place.
- Get invited. Secure an “invitation” to testify through the bill’s sponsor or committee members. When you are preparing to testify, find out the committee’s procedural rules including length of statement, format of panels, and number of packets required. Be sure to find out how far in advance written materials need to be submitted to committee staff.

Your written statement for testimony purposes should include:

- Title page
- Clear presentation of your position: “I/We support ...”
- Factual arguments and data as evidence to support your position
- A conclusion that reviews your basic position

Your oral statement is an opportunity to summarize your written statement for the committee members and the public. (Your written statement can be longer and becomes part of the record.) Effective oral testimony includes the following:

- An easily understood, jargon-free, five to ten minute statement, focused on the issue before the committee (many times the time limit will be much shorter – 3 minutes or so)
- The basic facts, including who you represent and your involvement with the issue
- A clear statement of your points of agreement or disagreement with what is being discussed
- Changes you would like made in the pending legislation
- Real examples of people who will be affected by the matter being discussed and how they will be affected
- A rebuttal of the opposition's main argument

So...

If you've never been active in legislative advocacy, now is a great time to start. You can start slow and work your way up. Your first efforts are not going to be in the form of legislative testimony. However, action is the key. Think about ways to build a relationship with your legislator, particularly during the interim. That way, when you get to the Capitol or send letters, emails, and phone calls, your legislator will recognize you as someone who knows what they are talking about and who feels strongly about good results for children and families.