

The Do's and Don'ts of Writing Congress

Letters are the barometers that measure political interest. Letters are counted, and they do count! Not just any letter is influential. FedCURE's experience has shown that form letters are not nearly as effective as a simple written message to your Senators and House Representatives. Just as people at the grassroots level have become more organized in their letter writing campaigns, legislators have become savvier in distinguishing a drummed-up letter or form letter from an expression of personal concern. So, it is especially important that your letter be personal, thoughtful, specific, and concise. Your letters should be written with the expectation that they will be read by someone of intelligence, but one who is usually less well informed than you are on your particular issue.

Here are some do's and don'ts to consider in writing a convincing letter.

Do

Do spell the government official's or legislator's name correctly and know his/her appropriate title (Representative, Senator, Delegate, Commissioner, Director, etc.). All elected should be addressed as "Honorable." If the Bureau of Prison official has a Ph.D., M.D. or other doctorate, make sure you address them as Doctor.

Do run spell check and grammar check before sending the letter. No matter how knowledgeable or passionate you are about an issue, if you have misspelled words and grammatical errors it takes away from your credibility.

Do write as an individual constituent. Because legislators pay the most attention to personal letters from their constituents, it is important that your letter express your own views. To make this clear, it will help to use personal stationery rather than a postcard or form letter; express your views in your own words rather than those of another; and refer to previous communications with the member, if possible. Using form letters entails a trade-off. What you gain in volume, you may lose in credibility. As in any other relationship, public officials respond better to the personal touch. Letters on FedCURE's letterhead may sometimes be helpful, but they are no substitute for the personal approach of an individually written letter. Faxes can be used if time is short, and telephone calls can be effective as well. E-mail is also an effective form of communication with both elected officials and BOP personnel.

Do write one page or less. Conciseness and brevity have impact when writing a letter. Because, legislators are so busy, they do not have much time to read through a long, involved letter in order to discover your point. If your letter is limited to one page, they can scan it quickly. If you have more information than will fit on one page, include it as background material, clearly marked as such, and attach it to the letter.

Do cover only one subject and clearly identify it as such. For example, at the top of the page write, "Re: (name of bill or issue)." This will speed up the routing of the letter in the office. If you have more than one subject which you would like to cover, then write a separate letter for each one. Separate staff often cover separate issues.

Do be as specific as possible. Regardless of what you are writing about, be as specific as possible in describing it. If it is a particular bill, try to refer to its number, the person who

introduced it, and what it will do. Similarly, if you refer to the legislator's position, it will demonstrate your specific interest in his/her actions. Show as much knowledge as you can, but don't hesitate to write merely because you are not an "expert."

Do make your letter timely. Legislators will appreciate having your views and information while the issue is before him/her.

Do ask the legislator to do something specific. It is important to ask for a specific action such as, "Please vote for (or against) [number of the bill]" or "We recommend the following changes to the proposed priorities."

Do include your name, return address, and telephone number on the letter.

Do hand write letters if they are legible; otherwise, type letters. Write each legislator individually. If you are contacting multiple legislators it is best to personalize each communication. However, if time is of the essence, don't hesitate to send a general letter via email to multiple officials.

Do use this outline:

- Indicate who you are and the purpose or nature of your problem or request. State that you are a FedCURE member. If you are a voter in a legislator's district, mention this in your letter.
- State specifically what you want the legislator to do about your problem or request i.e., vote for or against legislation, add or remove amendments, change language in legislation, etc. This applies to comments on proposed BOP rules as well as communications seeking action on the part of BOP personnel.
- Indicate why it is important to you that they take action regarding your problem or request. If you have been or are currently a federal prisoner or have a loved one that is a federal prisoner, you should make this clear to the legislator so they know where you are coming from.
- Put a "hook" in your letter. Ask for something that will require a substantive reply to your letter or communication. For example, ask a legislator if they are a cosponsor of legislation, ask for the status of pending legislation, or ask agency staff for the timetable for issuing regulations.
- Indicate your thanks, reiterate your most important message, and say that you expect a response.

Don't

Don't write letters that demand the legislator's cooperation.

Don't write a chain letter or form letter.

Don't threaten a legislator with defeat at the next election.

Don't adopt a politically partisan tone in your letter.

Don't become a chronic letter writer. Choose your issues wisely.

Don't use the legislator's first name in the salutation of your letter unless you know them personally.

Don't be discouraged!!!! You may not always receive a substantive response to your letters or communications, but following these suggestions will increase the chances that you will be heard effectively.