

Citizen Action Guide: *Contacting Public Officials*

I am concerned about an issue that is being considered – or needs to be considered – by the government. What should I do about it? Where do I start?

First of all, get the facts straight as much as possible. Few things can do *less* to help your cause than to speak or write or act based on false assumptions or inaccurate information.

That doesn't mean you have to know all the details or be an expert on the topic, but at least be sure that whenever you do act, whatever you state as a "fact" is actually true.

Otherwise, start with something like, "I've been told the government [did this or that]. Is that true? What can you tell me about it?" or "From what I understand, a bill you're about to vote on would [do this or that]. Is that your understanding of what it would do?"

Second, if you want to have influence with a public official, act maturely. Check your emotions and carefully consider your words. Think about it: would you be more inclined to listen to someone who was ranting or someone who treated you with dignity? Government officials, like all people, should be treated with respect.

This approach gains the respect of the person you are contacting, because it shows you are interested in the truth on an issue, rather than being interested only in venting your emotion at them. This is especially true with someone who generally doesn't see things or vote the way you want them to.

If you handle the facts and your emotions well, the official is likely to remember that the next time you call and will gladly listen to you. However, if you are rude or in any way treat them disrespectfully, that too will be remembered, and your influence will be severely damaged.

Which public official should I contact?

First, go to https://ballotpedia.org/Who_represents_me, to find out who represents you at the national, state, and (in some cases) local level, based on your address. (That web page asks for your email address as well, but you do not have to enter it if you would rather not.) Click on any of the officials it lists for your address, then **click on "Official Website" (located below their picture), and you'll see their contact information.**

If it is a national (sometimes called "federal") issue, you may contact the President of the United States, both of your *two* United States Senators (Roger Wicker and Cindy Hyde-Smith) who both represent the entire state, and your *one* United States Representative (also called Congressman), which could be Trent Kelly (1st District), Bennie Thompson (2nd District), Michael Guest (3rd), or Steven Palazzo (4th), depending on where you live.

If it is a **state issue**, you may contact Governor Tate Reeves, Lt. Gov. Delbert Hosemann, your one *state* senator and your one *state* representative. (State representatives are *not* called Congressmen;

the state legislature is not called Congress; state senators *and* representatives may generically be called legislators, but you would address them as Senator or Representative.)

It is perfectly acceptable to contact your state legislators at home using the phone number or email address posted on their legislative webpage. Also, during the legislative session (usually from January through March), you can call the Capitol switchboard at 601-359-3307 and leave them a message. Be aware that not all of them have offices in the Capitol, and even fewer of them have any staff. When not in session, most of them have regular jobs just like you, but they are still legislators and need to hear from you. They often do committee and other work even when they are not in session.

There will be times when it is appropriate to contact agencies at the national or state level, but if that is the case, your source of information will most likely have told you that. If you do contact an agency, it's still a good idea to let your legislators or other officials know. They might be able to get a response to your concern expedited.

If the matter is a **local issue**, it might be a county issue or a city issue. If it is a county issue, contact your county supervisor (yours is one of five for your county). If you don't know who yours is, you can call your county's Circuit Clerk or Chancery Clerk to ask. For municipal issues (city or town), contact your city's mayor and your city alderman or councilman for your district. (Alderman and councilman are two names for officials that serve essentially the same function, depending on the city's governing structure. In almost all municipalities in Mississippi, either a Board of Aldermen or a City Council is the legislative branch of city government.)

OK, I have my facts, I know who to contact, and I am ready to do something. How should I contact them – in person, call, write a letter, e-mail, social media?

The answer to that question depends on the official, your depth of knowledge, and your comfort level. Generally speaking, a phone call is the most efficient method. A phone call is quick, you know that *someone* has heard your message, even if it is a staff person, and you get an immediate response if you talk to the official or a knowledgeable staff member. If you're calling their cell phone, be respectful of the time of day. Same with text messages.

If the issue is of great importance to you, try to schedule a personal visit. Obviously, you would be able to *see* their reaction as well as hear it, and you could be assured that your message was not muddled (or ignored) by a staff member.

An email message can be effective. Beware, however, that some state legislators don't do email. Others will check their private email account but not their legislative account because they get so much spam and/or messages from people who are not their constituents. If you don't get a response, feel free to follow up with a call or text message.

If you contact them in writing, the number one rule is KEEP IT SHORT; otherwise *none* of it is likely to be read. Rule #2: make your point early in the message; don't try to build your case to a dramatic conclusion. If they like your early point, they'll keep reading, but if they read a few paragraphs and your point is not clear, they'll stop reading.

If I call, do I need to talk to the official, or is it alright to talk to a staff member?

If you are asking the official to vote for or against a particular piece of legislation, you can just leave a message with whoever answers the phone. You can leave your number or email address if you would like someone to call you back or write to you with a response.

If you ask for a response from your U.S. Senator or Congressman, don't be offended if a staff person contacts you. Officials at that level get so many calls and letters that there is not enough time for them to attend to them all personally. When leaving a message, mention the issue you are calling about, so that the staff person who calls you back will be one who works on that issue.

When calling a state legislator through the switchboard at the Capitol in Jackson, you will speak only to the switchboard operator. The operator will send the message to the legislator, who will call you back if you have requested that.

I have my facts together from a trusted source, and I called my official, but he/she didn't accept my information as valid. What do I do now?

Sometimes, officials will refute what you have been told, perhaps because they have more recent information, or perhaps because someone else has given them bad information. If this happens, thank them respectfully (even if only for their time), and report their response to the source from which you got your information. Assuming you got your information from an organization working on the issue - or even a reporter who wrote an article you read - this will help you *and* the source, because it could clear up confusion, update old information, or simply be informed as to what officials are hearing/thinking. It could also work in the reverse. For instance, if the officials are basing their comments on false or old information, you can help them by contacting them again with the truth or new information. Be sure to do this in a respectful manner, not "I told you so."

Don't assume they intentionally misled you. They may be working from old information, or they may have been given misleading information by people or groups who oppose your viewpoint. This would be your chance to impart the truth, but only if you have your facts together and if you have treated the official with respect.

Don't forget to say thanks!

Send the person a message thanking them for meeting with you and *briefly* summarizing the points you made. This can be by email, social media messaging, snail mail letter, or (depending on the length) text message. If he or she ends up doing what you asked, be sure to say thank you for that as well, both privately and publicly. If you post a complimentary comment about them on social media, they are likely to respond well when you contact them again!