

NATIONAL VOLUNTEER FIRE COUNCIL

Guide to Communicating with Elected Officials



NVFC
NATIONAL VOLUNTEER FIRE COUNCIL
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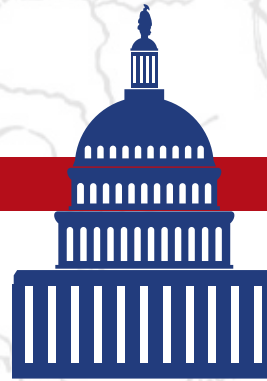
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Introduction

This manual is intended to give National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) members information and advice on how to engage public policy makers at all levels of government in order to educate them about the needs of the volunteer fire and emergency services. As eager as volunteer emergency responders are to serve their communities, we often fall short when it comes to engaging elected officials in public policy discussions. Elected officials at every level of government frequently make decisions that affect the fire and emergency services, and they need the valuable insight that only you can provide.

This Guide focuses on giving you tools to effectively communicate with members of Congress but can be applied to interactions with state and local officials as well. Becoming a successful communicator on the legislative front is largely a matter of learning about new audiences – legislators and their staffs – and new environments – the halls of Congress and state capitals.

Like other large institutions or industries, the U.S. Congress and state legislators have their own rules and ways of working. You will have to learn a little about those accepted methods and approaches in order to develop and maintain the kind of relationships you need to establish with lawmakers and their key staff members. This manual will teach you some of the necessary how-to's and 'tricks of the trade' of grassroots advocacy.



“All Politics Are Local”

This is the phrase that Thomas “Tip” O’Neill, one of the most famous Speakers in the U.S. House of Representatives, used to emphasize the fundamental importance of grassroots opinion. The politicians with the most public support at the local level get themselves into office and stay there, and no elected official ever forgets this fact. When you step forward as a spokesperson of the volunteer fire and emergency services, national and local politicians from your state will listen and appreciate the expertise that you provide.



The Tools of Effective Communication

The objective of this manual is to learn how to effectively communicate with members of Congress about fire and emergency services issues in writing, through social media, and in person. Tools for achieving this goal of effective communication are provided below.

Keep in mind these key points when communicating with Members of Congress:

1. Make sure your communication is simple, concise, and to the point.
2. Don't raise questions that you aren't prepared to answer.
3. Address the "5 W's" (Who? What? Where? When? Why?).
4. Whenever possible, work to build consensus.
5. Utilize resources available through the NVFC.

Tool #1: Letters and Emails

A well-crafted letter sent by mail or email is a common method for communicating with members of Congress. Their offices are set up to receive, log, and respond to constituents' letters. Your letter should be clear, concise, focused, and should usually be limited to one page. Follow up any broad statements with convincing evidence to support them. The letter should be polite and should compellingly make your case.

Here are the primary items to address in an effective letter:

Who: Include your position/title and the name of your department. Discuss the number of members in your department, the population you serve, and the spectrum of activities that the department engages in to protect the community.

What: Be clear about the issue and what you want the legislator to do. It is often as simple as supporting or opposing a certain bill. Be specific in your request; i.e. cosponsor a bill, cosign a letter, introduce a or vote for bill, etc. Use the bill number or its title if available.

Why: Clearly indicate why you are writing. How does this bill/issue directly impact you, your department, and/

or your community? **How does this bill/issue impact other people/agencies that this legislator represents?**

Where: What is the status of the bill (not introduced, recently introduced, passed out of committee, passed the House or Senate, etc.)?

When: If time is critical, explain why. For instance, if a bill is going to be on the floor for a vote in two days, make sure that the letter makes that clear.

Tips for Writing Effective Letters

- Be straightforward and clear in your wording. Don't assume that the member of Congress understands what you do.
- Always address the "Who" and "What" in the first paragraph of the letter. Reiterate the "What" in your closing paragraph as well.
- Use facts to back up your opinions. Even though it is best to keep the letter itself to one page, it is fine to attach supporting materials when necessary.
- Use your credentials to establish your expertise without boasting.
- Don't be confrontational, even when you have reason to believe that the official may hold a view different than your own.
- If you are sending a letter through the mail, be aware that it can take extra time for that letter to be processed by security before it is delivered to a Congressional office. If time is critical, it is better to send the letter by email.

Example Letter

The following is an example letter regarding the fictitious Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program.

Dear Senator _____:

As [chief, captain, firefighter] of the Generic Volunteer Fire Department (GVFD) in Generic, MI, I am writing to ask you to sponsor S. XXX, The Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program Act, which would provide funding to volunteer fire departments to purchase equipment and training (see attached/enclosed fact sheet from the National Volunteer Fire Council). GVFD has 86 members and protects a population of 5,000. Last year, we responded to 250 calls spanning from fires to emergency medical incidents to hazardous materials spills, our members logged 3,400 hours of training, and our youth fire prevention program reached 631 children in Generic.

GVFD operates on an extremely tight budget, which we are only able to maintain because of private fundraising. Our personal protective equipment (PPE) is, on average, 10 years old and half of our self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) were manufactured over eight years ago. Without functioning PPE and SCBA, our department could not provide fire suppression services. The Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program is critical to helping departments like ours purchase new PPE, SCBA, or address other significant areas of need.

Again, I urge you to sponsor S. XXX. If you have questions about the Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program or anything else related to the fire and emergency services, please feel free to contact me directly at XXX-XXX-XXXX or [email address].

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Title]

Enclosures

The details in the above example letter are designed to give you an idea of things you might want to include in a letter of your own, not hard and fast rules about details that you must include in any letter that you write. If your department only responds to a handful of calls per year, you may not want to cite that in your letter. Maybe your department protects a small population but responds through mutual aid agreements to communities with larger populations. Maybe there is a recent incident that drives home the importance of your department better than citing statistics would. The key is to include details about why your department is vital to community safety.

The second paragraph explains the link between the Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program and GVFD. This should be customized to the type of legislation you

are promoting. For instance, if you are writing about a bill that provides benefits to volunteer firefighters then you would want to include details about your department's recruitment and retention efforts instead of the need for PPE and SCBA.

Notice that all of the details are local. This is who we are, this is who we serve, this is what we need, and this is why the program is important to our community. The NVFC has information at www.nvfc.org on all of its legislative priorities that you can attach or enclose to explain a policy or program in greater detail and address national issues. This is important background information that your elected officials will want to know after you've made them understand why a particular policy or program is important locally.

Tool #2: Social Media

Most members of Congress use social media platforms to interact with and push information out to their constituents directly. You can use social media in the same way to communicate with your members of Congress.

[Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) are the social media platforms that are more commonly used by members of Congress to interact with constituents. Tool #2 focuses on how to use Twitter and Facebook to communicate with members of Congress, although it is worth noting that many offices use platforms like YouTube channels, Flickr, and Instagram, to name a few, to post pictures and videos that they send out links to via email and through Twitter/Facebook.

This tool assumes that you are already familiar with the basics of [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) and focuses on how to use those platforms specifically to communicate with congressional offices. You can use the following links for general information on how to use [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#), and this [U.S. Fire Administration](#) webinar from 2016 provides information on how emergency services agencies can use social media in general.

What makes social media an effective medium for interacting with members of Congress is the public nature of the communications. A message that you post on a member of Congress' Facebook page or in a Tweet that you tag them in will be publicly viewable by and will show up in the feeds of those to whom you and the member of Congress are connected. Because of the public nature of social media and the immediacy of this platform, congressional offices will often reply more quickly to a Facebook or Twitter message than they would to a letter or email. This makes social media especially useful when communicating something that is time-sensitive – for instance if a vote is about to take place.

A social media post is kind of like a public statement structured as a personal message. This makes social media an ideal platform for thanking a member of Congress for taking some requested action – i.e., “Thanks for cosponsoring H.R. 1234!” – or just for taking a meeting – i.e., “Thanks for meeting with me when I was in DC last week to discuss H.R. 1234!” Using social media to communicate this message is a way of informing a

broader audience of the action that was taken. Including a picture with the post will typically increase the level of interaction (likes/shares/retweets, etc.) with the post.

Many members of Congress limit two-way communications with the public to avoid messy or embarrassing public exchanges. A number of members of Congress either do not have a Facebook page or do not allow the public to post on their page for this reason. Even positive posts on congressional Facebook pages will often elicit negative replies from users who have an axe to grind politically. It is not uncommon for congressional offices to ignore overtly negative social media messages, since they are so frequent and engaging will only increase the attention paid to the message.

In general, the communication principles enumerated under Tool #1: Letters and Emails are relevant in composing a social media post to a member of Congress. However, whereas with a letter or email it is best to limit the length to one page if possible, with a social media post it is generally ideal to limit the length to just one or two sentences and then link to pictures, press releases, letters, articles, or other explanatory materials as necessary. You can also use social media to share a link to an NVFC article or resource with a congressional office, along with a personal note expressing your views on the material in the link.

Although social media can be used as the sole means of communicating with a member of Congress, it is generally going to be most effective when used to enhance the impact of letter/email writing, phone calls, and/or in-person meetings, which enable more in-depth explanation or discussion.

Tool #3: Meetings with Members of Congress

A personal visit generally has more immediate impact and leaves a longer-lasting impression than a letter. Every member of Congress has at least one local office in the district that they represent, and most have several.

Congressional district offices are staffed with people whose job it is to communicate with constituents like you. There are no barriers to stopping by these local offices and establishing relationships with the staff, who are essential advisors to members of Congress.

When the Member of Congress is Home, You're Invited

Most Representatives and Senators frequently travel to their home districts and states to meet with constituents, consult with their district staff, and keep in touch with local issues and voters. It is all set up for you. Simply call a district office to make an appointment to meet with your elected official when they are back in town.

You can also invite members of Congress to visit your department so that they can see firsthand what it is that you do. Representatives and Senators enjoy making these visits because it is an opportunity for their own public relations efforts.

If you are going to be in Washington, DC, set up an appointment to visit your legislators in their congressional offices. The DC offices are where the staff who work directly on legislation and policy issues are located, so it is also a good opportunity to make connections with them.

Tips for Meeting Legislators

- Before the meeting, let the NVFC national office know that you have scheduled a meeting. They can provide you with valuable information about the member of Congress and his or her position on specific issues or legislation.
- Make sure that you call ahead of time for an appointment and tell them what issue(s) you wish to discuss and whom you represent. When you call, ask to talk with the scheduler or whoever handles fire and emergency service issues. "Walk-ins," or people who show up at the office unannounced, are usually taken by whoever happens to be available at the time.
- Bring a one-page handout to leave behind for each point that you want to discuss. Make sure that the handout has a specific "ask" (i.e., please support or oppose a bill) and be sure to verbalize the "ask" during your meeting. Legislators and their staff always want to appear supportive, and if you don't ask them to take a specific action it is unlikely that they will commit to doing anything.
- Have an agenda so that you don't just chat until the clock runs out. Ask staff in advance how much time you will have and plan accordingly.
- Do not be disappointed if you only meet with staff. Staff members play a key role in advising elected officials.
- Volunteer yourself as a source of local expertise on fire and emergency service issues. If there is an issue that your legislator asks you for information about, it is probably already something that he or she is involved with and in a position to influence.
- Stick to the facts. NEVER stretch the truth or you risk losing credibility. It is better to admit when you don't know something, look into it, and get back to the staff with an answer in the near future.
- Be a good listener, even if the legislator disagrees with aspects of your position.
- Always follow up a meeting with a personal "thank you" note that re-states each "ask."

Tool #4: Develop a Public Relations Strategy

You've written to and met with your legislators and their staff. They understand your issues and may even be supportive of some of them. But what do the rest of their constituents think? Getting back to the example letter provided earlier, are the people of Generic, MI, going to be pleased if the Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program is funded? Will they understand the connection between that funding and the services they receive?

One of the most effective ways to get your issues addressed is to build public support for them. You can use this as a specific tool for communicating with elected officials or just to raise awareness generally. The better the public understands the issues the greater the likelihood that you will achieve your public policy goals.

Tips for Getting Your Message Out

- Regularly attend open local government meetings to give updates on the needs and accomplishments of your department. This not only serves to educate public policy decision-makers, it may get reported on in the local news, TV or news website, or get picked up through social media.
- Develop a media strategy for your department that includes a two-way dynamic with the media. Submit a press release or write a letter to the editor expressing your views to local media outlets. Make sure to send your members of Congress a copy if something you write gets printed in the newspaper/news web site or reported on in the local television news.
- Work with other volunteer and community-based groups. Building coalitions with other like-minded groups can make your voice stronger. For instance, if you inform local neighborhood associations about the skills, training, and commitment required of volunteer personnel, not to mention the cost savings the community derived, they may become allies.
- Designate one or two primary people in the department who will answer media inquiries and provide quotes. This could be the chief, but more importantly, it needs to be someone who is knowledgeable about the department's stance on key issues, will provide a consistent message, and interacts with the press on a regular basis.

- When something good happens to your fire department, let people know about it. If you get a federal grant, invite your legislators to the firehouse to make a presentation for local media. If a bill that you've been hounding your legislators to support is enacted, send a letter to the local paper to thank them publicly.

Tool #5: Use the NVFC as a Resource

The NVFC is here to give you advice, answer questions, or act as a sounding board for you as you work to communicate with your elected officials. The government relations staff can be reached by phone at 1-888-ASK-NVFC (275-6832) or visit the NVFC at www.nvfc.org to find the email address of the staff member that you wish to contact.

The NVFC web site has resources and fact sheets to help you in your advocacy efforts. Go to www.nvfc.org, click on the box for either Fire Service or EMS/Rescue, and then click on the box for Advocacy. This will take you to a page through which you can review active legislative action alerts, read about the NVFC's legislative priorities, look at the status of all active legislation that the NVFC is currently advocating for or against, and read recent NVFC news articles on legislation and other federal policy issues.

You can [subscribe](#) for free to the *Dispatch*, the NVFC's bi-weekly newsletter, to get reports on what is happening in Washington, DC. You can also [subscribe](#) to receive Legislative Action Alerts so that you know when bills are introduced or votes are about to take place in Congress about which you will want to contact your legislators.