

HOW AND WHY TO COMMUNICATE WITH LEGISLATORS

CHRISTOPHER ZILAR

DIRECTOR OF SPOKANE TRIBE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION



OBJECTIVES

By the end of the session, participants will know or be able to:

- Demonstrate a basic understanding of the continuum of communication with lawmakers: education, advocacy, and lobbying
- Identify at least one good reason to be in regular communication with legislators
- Identify three points lawmakers need to understand about Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation
- Create a plan on communicating with legislators.



INTRODUCTIONS

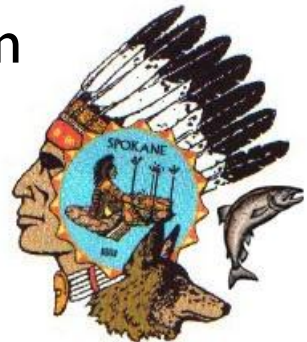
This presentation is meant for advocates:

- Council members
- Elders
- Program directors
- Managers
- Community advocates



WHY SHOULD WE REACH OUT TO U.S. LAWMAKERS?

- Face-to-face meetings hold dramatically more weight than other forms of communication
- Lawmakers and their staff enjoy meeting constituents, and many staff love the idea of working on new problems
- There are thousands of federal programs in the U.S. government. We all think ours is important. We all want the feds to know about us, and honestly, it's basically impossible for them to know about every program (no matter how important the programs are).



WHY SHOULD WE REACH OUT TO U.S. LAWMAKERS?

Contact Type	Numerical Value	Tally Number	Score
Face-to-face	50	2	100
Letter	5	20	100
Phone Call	2	50	100
Social Media or Email	0.1	1,000	100
Total			400



WHY SHOULD WE REACH OUT TO U.S. LAWMAKERS?

Contact Type	Numerical Value	Tally Number	Score
Face-to-face	50	10	500
Letter	5	25	125
Phone Call	2	200	400
Social Media or Email	0.1	2,000	200
Total		2,235	1,225



CONTINUUM OF ADVOCACY

Education

Advocacy

Lobbying



EDUCATION

- Information
- Teaching
- Answering questions
- Descriptions
- Little to no discussion about laws or policies



ADVOCACY

- Asking for help
- Explaining how laws or policies help or hurt, with the intent of persuading someone to consider adopting policy positions that will help the advocate or advocate's constituents
- Other types of persuasion used on policy-makers intended to help the advocate or advocate's constituents



LOBBYING

- Specific call to action
- Discussion of specific laws or bills with the intent of persuading lawmakers to vote a specific way – especially if it helps the advocate or the advocate's constituents
- Requests for lawmakers to sponsor or propose specific bills, laws, amendments



LOBBYING IS NOT ALLOWED!!!

Title 2 > Subtitle A > Chapter 11 > Part 200 > Subpart E > Subsection 200.450

“(a) The cost of certain influencing activities associated with obtaining grants, contracts, cooperative agreements, or loans is an unallowable cost.”

Stick to educating, avoid advocating, and never lobby.



PROCESS STEP ONE

- Know who your lawmakers are
 - <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/map>
- Set up appointment www.house.gov/ and www.senate.gov/states
- Be prepared to provide your contact information (name, address, phone number, email)



PROCESS

STEP ONE

- Hello, my name is _____, I work for _____. I'm interested in setting up a time to come meet you and tell you about the clients I serve. I'll also be looking for your feedback to see if there might be better ways our program can operate.
- (If asked for more info) I (direct, manage, serve, etc.) a program called _____ Vocational Rehabilitation. Our goal is to facilitate the process whereby Native Americans living with disabilities find meaningful employment, thus allowing them to become fully self-sufficient.



PRACTICE



FOR THE NOVICE

- Be encouraged
- Build relationship
- Legislative Aids (LA) are important
- Start with supportive legislators
- Show gratitude



FOR THE EXPERIENCED

- Train guests (staff, volunteers, clients) how to stay on message
- Focus on lawmakers based on specific committees they serve on:
 - Appropriations
 - Health, Education, Labor, and Pension
 - Indian Affairs
- Learn about and refer to their personal interests
- Refer to previous meetings



KNOW YOUR BASICS

- Department>Office>Administration>Program
- Department of Education (DoE) > Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) > Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) > American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Program (AIVR)
- Your program's service area boundaries (a map helps)



KNOW YOUR BASICS

- Demographics of the people who live in your program's service area
- Specifics about the Native Americans/Alaskan Natives within your program's service area, such as percent of people living with disabilities, percent of the total population, poverty rates, total number of Native Americans/Alaskan Natives



KNOW YOUR BASICS (CONT.)

- Your annual budget, staffing, program goals, tribe's population and projections
- Number of clients served, number of successes (give one specific example)
- The main differences between your program and your state's program



KNOW YOUR BASICS (CONT.)

- The legislator's district
- Your favorite success story
- Your greatest challenges
- Your clients' challenges (what disabilities are most frequent in your clients?)



PRACTICE



UNDERSTAND LAWMAKERS

What lawmakers want/like

- Understand what's going on in their area of jurisdiction
- Information
- Opportunities to make a difference



UNDERSTAND LAWMAKERS

What lawmakers want/like

- How to advocate for you to their opponents
- Connection between their legislative successes (or supported policies) to what you are doing
- How does your info intersect with their pet projects, pet peeves, or personal values?



UNDERSTAND LAWMAKERS

What lawmakers dislike/don't want

- Personal attacks, confrontations
- Being asked for increase in funds
- Discussion of how funds help you or your program survive



UNDERSTAND LAWMAKERS

What lawmakers dislike/don't want

- One-sided conversations
- Overtly politicized discussions, overly focused on sappy/emotional stories or overly focused on economic impacts to the program



UNDERSTAND LAWMAKERS

Issues facing lawmakers

- Schedules (see <https://www.house.gov/legislative/>)
- Elections
- Influences:
 - Party, contributors, special interests, public opinion, staff's opinions, personal values, family culture, religion, campaign promises, other lawmakers
- Personal issues (family, controversies, etc.)



RESEARCH YOUR LEGISLATOR

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Current_members_of_the_United_States_Senate
 - Or <https://www.senate.gov>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Current_members_of_the_United_States_House_of_Representatives
 - Or <https://www.house.gov/representatives/>

Search engines, news articles, personal contacts, etc.



PRACTICE



OTHER TIPS

- Share your challenges in the light of hope and what works
- Resist the urge to myth-bust
- Use full titles, not acronyms (Rehabilitation Services Administration, not RSA)



OTHER TIPS

- They sometimes expect an “ask”. Redirect them to your info.
- Make appointments as soon as possible after the election of a rookie lawmaker.
- Always answer honestly, and be willing to say “I don’t know, but I’ll check and get back to you.”
- If a lawmaker sounds unsupportive, listen carefully to understand where exactly they come from. Thank them for their candor.



OTHER TIPS

- Keep track of all their questions and all their comments or suggestions. Use those for future meetings.
- Provide them an opportunity to ask questions as well as what's on their mind.



WHAT TO BRING WITH YOU

- One-page handout
- Notepad and pen
- Professional appearance (clothes, personal hygiene)
- Bring notes about your basic info



PRACTICE



CONTACT

Christopher Zilar

Director, Spokane Tribe of Indians Vocational Rehabilitation Program

Email: Christopher.Zilar@SpokaneTribe.com

Office Phone: 509.606.2018, ext 605

