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**Publisher: Promise the Children**  
**Date: July 2006**

## **Why Bother Contacting My Representative?** **(Our Policy Consultant Explains How Your Correspondence Makes a Difference)**

### **How Your Letters, Phone Calls and E-mails Impact Legislators**

State legislators, governors, and members of the United States Congress receive staggering amounts of mail, phone calls, faxes, and email from their constituents every day. If they did, read each piece of constituent correspondence, they wouldn't have time to meet with constituents, read briefing memos, and vote. But **your letter still counts--literally**. As do your emails and phone calls.

Your legislator will likely see a daily or weekly tally of how many letters, emails, and calls have been received, sorted by issue and whether or not constituents are “pro” or “con”. You might be just a number—but numbers matter. Statistics about constituent correspondence are essential information for your elected representatives.

The tally of constituent correspondence serves several purposes...

- It informs politicians of what their constituents consider to be the most important issues of the day.
- It also provides some political cover should legislators need to deviate from the positions of their respective parties' leaderships.
- Legislative staffers may cite mail statistics in their briefing memos to the legislator.
- Correspondence from constituents can have an aggregated effect on the questions a legislator chooses to ask during a committee hearing, what bills a legislator co-sponsors, and how a legislator votes.

### **Creating a Letter that Gets Attention (In a Good Way)**

There are several steps that constituents can take to increase the chances that their letters will have an impact beyond being counted in a spreadsheet.

1. The most important step is to confirm that you are a constituent and include your full postal mailing address as proof of residency, even in an email. Senators and representatives do not, as a rule, respond to individuals outside of their state or district.
2. Write in a way that is personal and concrete. Provide vivid examples of your own experiences with children and their needs. Mention other local friends or area groups (who will also be the legislator's constituents) who share your concern about children's issues.



3. Be specific about what you are asking your legislator to do—e.g., vote for passage of a specific bill or amendment or resolution or press for increased appropriations for existing programs or authorization for new ones. Remember that your correspondence will be of greater value if you write before a critical vote, rather than after. (Promise the Children offers email notification services to alert members about impending legislation. Please visit [www.promisethechildreनु.नु](http://www.promisethechildreनु.नु) to sign-up!)

Other things to remember:

- Be polite and brief (no more than two pages).
- Do not carbon copy excessively. This will annoy the staff and make them less likely to reply.
- Do not SPAM. If you write every day, it's unlikely that you will be taken seriously. (You might even wind up in a so-called STUN file—that's NUTS spelled backwards.)

These steps increase the probability that your letter will be read with attention, if not by the legislator, then by the legislative assistant who advises your lawmaker on important issues.

### **Tell It to the Tab!**

Is this section going to be split off from the mail/email bits? It could be. I just wonder about saying that this is “most important” since we're trying to convince folks that letter writing to their reps is important.

Local media exerts a great deal of influence on politicians. All senators and representatives track what is being said about them in the local papers. In the U.S. Senate, for example, most offices have a press intern who dutifully assembles “clips” every morning. The clips consist of all references to the senator in major national news outlets as well as the state's local newspapers. This includes letters to the editor and op-eds that mention the senator by name. The clips are then posted where the senator can review them. It is a political reality that if you write a short, well-argued opinion piece that appears in a local newspaper, it will likely carry more weight with your legislator than a press release offered by a national nonprofit agency.



## **How Your Letter or E-mail to a Member of Congress is Answered**

- The postal mail arrives (after being irradiated to reduce the threat of anthrax contamination) at the legislator's front office.
- The mail is then sorted and coded by interns, staff assistants, or a mail coordinator--sometimes by all three.
- If it's an issue that the legislator has already received a lot of mail on (for example, the war in Iraq), chances are there's probably two form letters--one "pro" and one "con"--depending on whether or not the constituent has voiced support or opposition to a particular policy.
- These incoming letters from constituents are then batched and sent to the printing office to receive the appropriate "pro" or "con" form letter, each crafted to avoid antagonizing constituents.

The remaining letters are sorted as either a "case" or an "issue." A case letter is from or about a constituent who needs help, usually in dealing with a government agency—for example, getting the Social Security Administration to clear up a problem with a constituent's benefits. An issue letter is just that – a letter addressing a public policy issue.

These letters are divvied up amongst the legislative correspondents (LCs) whose job it is to answer all the letters that come in relating to their policy areas (e.g., health care, education, foreign affairs, agriculture, et cetera). If the LC doesn't know how to answer a particular letter, he or she will usually ask the Legislative Assistant (LA) who is responsible for advising the Senator on that particular policy area. The LC's letter is then sometimes vetted by the LA and then possibly edited by a mail editor before being printed and sent to the autopen or for the Senator's signature.

E-mails are treated the same way as letters. It used to be that e-mails were almost ignored on Capitol Hill. But in the wake of the anthrax poisonings of 2001, most members encourage e-mail as an alternative to mail.

Know that if you simply forward an e-mail, your correspondence will not be read closely. In fact, many Hill offices now have mail software that can compare incoming emails with others from a mass emailing. This software sends a form e-mail back in response.