Speaking Out: How to Get Your Legislators to Listen

Getting started
• Get to know the legislators in your district: Read their bio or website, find out what issues they support or oppose, their voting history, the committees they serve on, any bills they have authored.
• Write it down: Decide what issues are most important to you and how to present your message concisely (1-3 minutes and 1-2 issues).
• Share your story in different ways: Use face-to-face meetings, write letters or emails, call your legislators’ office, or leave a message with the governor to ensure your voice is heard
• Practice what you want to say. Think about your responses to any questions beforehand.

What to include in your speech or written message
• Your name and where you live: Include your address or place of residence and state that you are a registered voter in their district
• You are a part of the National MS Society: State you represent over 12,000 people in Washington state with MS and nearly 72,000 others impacted by MS, including friends, family, caregivers and health care professionals.
• Key points of the legislative agenda: (See handouts.)
• Explanation of how this issue impacts your everyday life: Share a personal story or facts that explain why this issue is important to you.
• Description of why this issue is important to the MS community in their district: Include a fact that supports your argument (see fact sheet for examples).
• Ask what specific action your legislator is willing to take: Be clear whether you intend for the legislator to support a bill or budget item or oppose it. (Refer to the title of the bill or the program name).

Meeting with your legislator
• Politely, but firmly and confidently state your position and do not allow the legislator to get sidetracked.
• Be specific about what action you want the legislator to take and why.
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- Ask the legislator what action they are willing to take. (For example: Would you support expanding funding for special needs transportation?)
- Make it clear that you will follow up and monitor the legislator’s actions.
- If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so and offer to follow up.
- Thank them for visiting with you, provide your leave behind materials, and leave contact information or letter.

Be an effective communicator
- Tailor your message to your audience: Appeal to logic or emotion.
- Have self-confidence: Speak passionately and with conviction.
- Conduct a dialogue: Listen and ask questions, pause to hear the other person’s point of view.
- Use eye contact and receptive facial expressions
- Be respectful and assertive, but not aggressive: Don’t accuse, judge or exaggerate.
- Act professionally: Dress appropriately, thank the person for their time.
- Use standard spelling and grammar: Avoid slang, and proofread when writing a letter or email.
- Establish mutual accountability: Determine the next steps and follow-up.
- Ask the legislator or staff how you can help with their goals.

Be visible
- Wear your orange scarf and your nametag.
- Talk about your legislative priorities, your personal experiences and everywhere you go, talk about our issues—a Senator, a legislative aide or the media might be listening.
- On the back of your leave-behind folder, write a 2-4 word message that is important to you (for example: “Member of the National MS Society,” or “Support Special Needs Transportation”).

Follow-up after the Day of Activism
- Send a thank you note to each of the legislators who made an appointment with you, even if they were not able to attend
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- **Follow our blogs**: WeMoveMS.blogspot.com and msconnection.org/Blog
- **Maintain your relationship with your legislators**: When you see them again, re-introduce yourself, remind them you are their constituent, and tell them you are a part of the National MS Society. Your goal is to become a valuable, honest, and reliable resource on issues that impact people living with MS. Invite the legislator to your support group or to join your Walk or Bike team.
- **Follow your legislators**: Track any changes that occur in the state budget, monitor how your legislator votes or what new bills they may be sponsoring, and contact them periodically to let them know how they’re doing.
- **Attend in district town halls**: Legislators usually hold one or more town halls in their home districts to inform their constituents of the issues being discussed in Olympia and to meet with constituents who cannot travel to the Capitol. Wear your orange scarf at these meetings and bring friends who may be new to advocacy.
- **Sign up for MS Action Alerts** to keep you updated on breaking news, MS issues, and ways to get involved. Visit www.nationalmssociety.org/MSActivist.

Other ways to be heard

- **Letter-to-the-editor**: Write a concise letter to your local newspaper that tells your unique story and make sure to include your name, address and telephone number.
- **Opinion piece**: Consider submitting an article on a subject you know and care about.
- **Talk with a reporter or editor**: Stop by your local newspaper or media office and chat with reporters.
- **Radio call-in shows**: Share your story about living with MS when health care or political issues are discussed.
- **Reach out to other others**: Talk to your friends who are also politically active and interested in other issues. Ask them to come along for a visit with your elected officials to talk about MS.
- **Get involved with your National MS Society chapter**: You can help raise awareness of MS by volunteering with the National MS Society.
Scheduling an Appointment with your Legislator: Instructions & Sample Scripts

Prepare Your Request
Even when working in their district office, legislators and staff members have busy schedules. Before trying to schedule your visit, have a few possible meeting days and times ready, but be prepared to be flexible if your legislator is not available at that time.

Each office is different, but many offices prefer to receive an email request for in person visits. Most offices have a scheduler who will take care of scheduling your visit. Before sending your email, call your legislator’s office and ask who you should send an email to in order to schedule a visit with your legislator. Send an email to the scheduler.

If you do not hear back within a few days, follow up with a phone call to the scheduler. If you are not able to reach him or her, be persistent in following up. Eventually you will be able to schedule your visit.

Send a confirmation email a few days before your visit, to make sure that your legislator is still available and the meeting time has not changed.

Sample Email Script to Request an Appointment
Here is a sample email that can be sent to schedule a visit with your legislator.

Dear (scheduler’s name),

My name is (insert name here) and I am an MS Activist and a constituent in (insert legislator’s name)’s district. I would like to schedule a visit with (insert legislator’s name) on (insert date here) at (insert preferred time) to discuss the legislative agenda of the National MS Society in (State), and to discuss how MS impacts my life. Please let me know if the legislator is available on this day. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
(Your name here)
Sample Call Script to Follow-Up on Email Request

YOU: “Hi my name is _____ and I’m trying to reach (scheduler’s name). I sent an email on (insert date here) to schedule a visit with my legislator.”

Staffer: “Okay let me get (scheduler’s name) for you.”

YOU: “Hi my name is ____ and I contacted you by email to schedule a visit with my representative.”

Scheduler: “Okay, what date were you looking at?”

YOU: “I am looking at (insert dates and timeframes here) but can be flexible depending on the legislator’s schedule.”

Scheduler: “The legislator is very busy but let’s schedules a visit on (insert date and time here).”

YOU: “Thank you for your time. I am looking forward to it. If you need to reach me you can contact me at (insert your phone number here) or (insert your email here).”
Sample Thank You Note

After your visit is over, be sure to send a thank you note to your legislator or the staff member you met with in his or her office. This thank you note helps leave an impression on the office and reminds them of your story and what you discussed. You are encouraged to send a hand-written thank you note in the mail to the person you met with. If writing is difficult for you, an email may be used as a substitute to a hand written note.

**Sample Thank You Note**

Dear (legislator or staff member you met with),

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me on (insert date here). I enjoyed meeting with you and discussing MS priority issues in Virginia. I look forward to working more with you in the future.

Sincerely,
(your name here)

It is also appropriate to include a specific reminder of the conversation you had with the legislator or staff member.

For example: “As mentioned, I will follow up with you in a few weeks regarding the transportation issue we discussed.”