

## **TAKE FIVE...**

### **Advocacy Made Easy for Busy People**

Just like the famous Paul Desmond refrain, here's something deceptively simple – and as likely to stay with you.

Experienced advocates know three things.

(1) Phone/letter/email campaigns remain effective. Elected officials (and their staff) note the issues that generate the most letters and calls; they are a useful gauge of community support for/against an issue. But,

(2) Broad appeals for action don't work. Alerts that sound too general, or too complicated, get set aside.

(3) The competition for attention is very keen. By now, there are so many groups sending out emails and “snail mails” requesting action that readers ignore much of what comes their way. And groups with tight budgets can't afford to waste scarce staff time or resources on maintaining lists, postage, paper/emails, for long alerts that don't get results.

**If you want your appeals to produce results:** make taking action easy; make it time-limited; & design it to fit into busy lives. Here's one version that gets results.

A few years ago U of Washington social work students tried to get other students to write letters about legislative proposals they thought might harm children, but the answers they got just seemed like excuses. In response to their pleas, people said:

- |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| -- I don't have time                       | -- I don't know what to say |
| -- I don't know my legislator              | -- I don't know the address |
| -- I don't have any envelopes/paper/stamps | -- I can't.                 |

To their credit, the students took the “excuses” seriously, treating them as real barriers to be eliminated. In the process they developed “TAKE FIVE FOR KIDS” -- a way to be an advocate for children in just five minutes or less.

At a strategically located table, during lunch hour, they provided answers to all the “excuses:” sample letters, brief fact sheets, people to answer questions, blank paper/envelopes/stamps, plus the names and addresses of all the legislators. Visible to all was a big sign reading: **TAKE FIVE FOR KIDS.**

Right off the bat, they generated a couple dozen letters. A week later they were back at their table with new information – and this time they got twice as many letters. Before long, people were referring to the “take five tables” and inventing variations.

Some advocates have adapted the idea by renaming and re-formatting their legislative alerts, with a section for “actions you can take in 5 minutes or less,” or, “TAKE FIVE FOR ... (HOUSING, or WHALES, or ...)” Like the students at their table, these alerts include all the key ingredients, in a simple, easy-to-accomplish format that enables concerned citizens to fit advocacy into busy lives.

On a single page, usually within a “box,” are brief information, brief messages, and the information needed to contact a legislator by mail, email, or phone.

People who get **TAKE FIVE** (a.k.a. Legislative) alerts in written form say they prop them on their telephones or computer keyboards every week until they’ve made their calls or written letters. (Guilt, they admit, is part of why it works: “you mean I couldn’t take *5 minutes a week* to help out?”) Those who work for public agencies get their TAKE FIVE alerts at home; they cannot lobby while on the public payroll, but on their own time they are citizens like anybody else, and lobbying is allowed.

“**TAKE FIVE TABLES**” are popping up everywhere: in the lobbies of social agencies and hospitals, after services on Sunday, at PTA or professional group meetings. Some bring **laptops** or **cell phones** and let participants send a message immediately.

One group set up a “**Take Five Table**” at the beginning of the cross-Iowa bike ride, hoping to expand their network in support of a new bicycle helmet law; they got 400 members signed up in just a couple of hours.

Women eager to see the Violence Against Women Act renewed in 2000 set up Take Five Tables beside the “Silent Witness” silhouettes of women murdered in domestic violence: over 400 letters resulted.

Psychology students at the University of Utah set up tables in the cafeteria, seeking letters in support of higher education for foster children; they got over seven hundred during the course of a week. As one participant reported later,

With only 2 days (4 hours each) at the tables, we got 271 letters signed in support of the bill!! I am so thrilled at this success not only for the bill, but for the amazing number of students that wanted to get involved and learn a little more about the process (and learn who their legislator is!).”

“Take Five” alerts and tables work to: *generate letters/emails/calls, ... sign up members for a grassroots network, ... win involvement in a community education campaign.* People who take part say that just knowing they can be advocates for something they care about, **in five minutes or less**, is empowering.

**Tips:** because they get so much computer-generated mail, many legislative offices make a distinction between “astro-turf messages” (i.e., identical cards or letters that might all be signed by the same person using different pens) and “real grass roots messages.” Both are noticed, but real grass roots communications get more attention.

To make sure the letters/emails/calls generated by your **Take Five Tables** fall in the “real” category, even when the basic message is identical, have senders do three things;

- ⇒ sign and print their names (if the message is written)
- ⇒ give their home address
- ⇒ add a personal note – even something as brief as “I really care” or, “this means a lot to me,” makes clear this isn’t astro-turf. The possibilities are endless....

## PASSING LAWS: The Short Version (WA State)

### The process has some complicated parts, but the basics are simple.

**BACKGROUND:** Every bill is assigned a bill number. In Washington state, Senate Bills start with **SB**, followed by a 4-digit number beginning with 5 or 6; House Bills start with **HB**, followed by a 4-digit number beginning with 1 or 2. E.g.: **SB 5380** is the 380<sup>th</sup> bill introduced in the Senate during that Session. (In the U.S. Congress, Senate bills start with **S.** and House of Representatives bills start with **H.R.** – bill numbering in both bodies begins with 1.)

With every bill there are interested groups who quickly take sides once a bill is introduced (FOR the bill, AGAINST the bill, UNDECIDED but possible to sway; some will like parts of a bill, or hope to add amendments to improve a bill.). Each group tries to influence the fate of the bill.

### The legislative process is set up to answer 3 questions about every bill.

#### **(1) First Question: Is this bill a good idea?**

That question is answered in one of the many policy committees – e.g., the Education Committee, the Health Committee, the Commerce Committee, the Agriculture Committee. In order to answer the question, the Committee will take testimony from the public, ask questions, collect information. These sessions are public, and you can testify. In our state, anyone can “sign in” and indicate whether they support or oppose a bill.

Once a Committee has taken public testimony, and heard from key staff from the agencies that would implement the bill, they schedule an **Executive Session**. That is when Committee members debate, amend, and vote on the bill before them. This is also public.

Throughout, issue groups can influence the process at every stage, by: revising their strategy as the bill changes; conveying their positions to the Governor and the legislative Leadership; talking to the media/writing Letters to the Editor; forming alliances to build voter support for their position; lobbying their legislators in the Capitol or back home in the District.

If 51% of the members of the Policy Committee vote “yes,” the bill goes on to the next stage.

#### **(2) Second question: Is this a good use for our tax dollars? Can we afford it?**

There are many good ideas but we cannot afford them all.

The second question is answered in one of the Fiscal Committees – in our state called the **WAYS & MEANS Committees**, plus the House has 3 special **APPROPRIATIONS Committees**. Their job is to focus on the costs or savings represented by each bill, and make hard choices among many good ideas.

Fiscal committees tend to be larger than policy committees, but they operate much like any other committee: they take testimony from the public, they hear from people in the Executive Branch agencies, and they also go into Executive Session to debate, amend the bill, and vote. Just as in the policy committee, these meetings are open to the public.

If 51% of the Fiscal Committee members vote “yes,” the bill moves on to the next stage.

(All this time good advocates continue to: lobby their legislators, make sure the legislative Leadership and the Governor's office know their group's position, expand their alliances if possible, and work to get their message into the media and out to the public.)

**(3) The third question: Can a majority of the people support this?**

Until this point only the members of a few committees have had their say, but in our system, **everyone** gets to be represented on every issue that gets past the **initial stages**. That happens on the Floors of the Senate and of the House -- where each of us is represented.

On the House and Senate Floors, once again they can: debate, have an opportunity to amend the bill, and finally – every Senator and Representative can vote **on** the bill as amended. Even at this stage it is possible to have an influence – citizens can send **notes** to their legislators with a brief message, saying who you are and how you want them to **vote**, or they can email.

If 51% of the members of the full House/full Senate vote "yes," the bill moves to the next stage.

The same process has to happen in both chambers, so if a bill has only been through one body -- the House or the Senate -- it goes to the other body next.

Then, if there are differences between the House and Senate versions, those differences have to be reconciled, often in a Conference Committee.

Ultimately, the identical bill must be passed by a majority of both the House and the Senate.

**Every bill that makes it through the legislature goes to the Governor.**

Bills that pass the Legislature, **go to the Governor** -- which is **why** s/he is so important. The Governor gets to sign the bill or veto it. In our state the Governor **may** veto individual sections of a bill (but not just words or phrases) – in effect a "partial veto."

If the bill gets signed, it becomes a law. (That's why all those cartoon versions of the process are titled, "How A Bill Becomes A Law.")

Just in case anyone missed the point, we can influence the process at every step on the way:

- ◆ By suggesting IDEAS (or AMENDMENTS) for BILLS,
- ◆ when a bill is discussed in a POLICY COMMITTEE,
- ◆ when a bill is discussed in a FISCAL COMMITTEE,
- ◆ when a bill is discussed in the FULL HOUSE and FULL SENATE,
- ◆ when a bill comes out of CONFERENCE COMMITTEE with changes agreed to by both bodies,
- ◆ when a bill goes to the GOVERNOR for signature.

That's why you may be asked to speak up about the same bill, *many times*, at different stages.

This is an amazing process, that can be daunting... fun... enlightening... confusing... but above all: empowering.. Democracy is GREAT!

# QUICK QUIZ

(Washington State)

The number of Senators in the Washington state Senate \_\_\_\_\_

The number of Representatives in the WA House of Representatives \_\_\_\_\_

The number of Legislative Districts with Low-income People \_\_\_\_\_

Name your state Senator and 2 state Representatives  
My state Senator is \_\_\_\_\_

My state Representatives are \_\_\_\_\_

How long (in years) is a state Senator's term? \_\_\_\_\_

How long (in years) is a state Representative's term? \_\_\_\_\_

Is there a limit on the # of terms a legislator may served? Yes No

What percent of Washington state legislators are women? 16 36 66

What is the one thing the Legislature MUST do \_\_\_\_\_

Name the current Governor \_\_\_\_\_

What can a Governor do with legislation s/he doesn't like \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the Speaker of the House (in WA) \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the Majority Leader of the WA Senate \_\_\_\_\_

What do Committee Chairs do \_\_\_\_\_

When does the legislature meet next year \_\_\_\_\_

What is the state gem \_\_\_\_\_

What is the number of the TOLL-FREE LINE to the Capitol? \_\_\_\_\_

Of the 50 states' tax systems, how does Washington's rank?  
Most Fair \_\_\_\_\_ About average \_\_\_\_\_ Least Fair \_\_\_\_\_

# STARTER KIT

Many people would like to influence the laws and budgets that affect their lives, but just don't know how to get started. Here are a few easy steps to do just that.

## 1. Remember how government is organized:

If you want to influence public policy, it helps to remember 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies. In our system we have THREE LEVELS of government, and we have THREE BRANCHES of government.

- The three LEVELS of government are: **Federal, State, and Local.**
- The three BRANCHES of government are **Legislative, Executive, and Judicial.**

At the local level:

- The **Legislative branch** is called the **City Council**. Its job is to pass laws or ordinances (the name for local laws).
  
- The **Executive branch** is headed by the **Mayor**.  
Under him comes all of the executive branch agencies – like the Department of Human Services (youth services) or the Department of Parks and Recreation (playing fields, skate board parks), the Police & Fire Departments. Its job is to carry out the laws.
  
- The **Judicial branch** at the local level is made up of the **Municipal Courts**. Its job is to interpret the laws.

We can influence the actions of all three levels of government, and all three branches. You needn't be an expert, you just need to care (and never give up).

## 2. Find the people who represent YOU:

It's easy to get the names and contact information for your elected officials at all three levels.

- To learn the names of your two U.S. Senators and one U.S. Representative, go to [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov), and [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov). It offers to "Find Your Senators" and when their names pop up, they also give you contact information and links to their respective home page.
  - To learn the names of your one state Senator and two state Representatives, go to [www1.leg.wa.gov](http://www1.leg.wa.gov), and enter your address under District Finder. The names and contact information for all three will pop up, along with links to their home pages.
  - To learn the names of your County Councilmember, go to [www.metrokc.gov/council](http://www.metrokc.gov/council). Click on Council members, and then at "Which District Is Mine" search by address or by map.
  - To learn the names of our nine City Council members, go to [www.seattle.gov/council](http://www.seattle.gov/council).
- OR: get **THEY REPRESENT YOU** – a free pamphlet from the League of Women Voters.

## 3. Be part of a group:

It's hard to be an advocate working alone, but easy as part of a group. Most advocacy groups will tell you when your voice is needed, offer sample messages, and good information.

Whatever your issue, and whatever level of energy you can commit, when contacting elected officials, it helps to remember your ABC's + P.

Be ACCURATE; be BRIEF; be CCOURTEOUS; and be PERSISTENT.



**CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE**  
*A Voice for Washington's Children, Youth & Families*

## **Tips for meetings with legislators in Olympia**

- **Prepare for the meeting** by deciding: 1) what information and messages you want to convey, and 2) what you want the legislator to do.
- **Introduce yourself** by name and affiliation (if relevant). State that you are a constituent from their district.
- Most meetings with legislators in Olympia last for 15 minutes or less. **Be sure your message is short and concise.** Avoid getting into too many details about your issues. An anecdote is good, but a life story is too long.
- **State the problem that concerns you, its importance and what you want them to do about it.** Pause to allow the legislator to respond; listen to them to find out where they stand on the issue.
- **Be ready to answer questions.** It is OK if you don't know the answers. If this is the case, just tell legislators that you don't know the answer, but that you will get back to them—if you say this, you must follow through.
- **Leave some information** (like a fact sheet) and be sure that it has your contact information on it.
- It's OK if you meet with the **legislative assistant.** They are usually very friendly and will convey your message to the legislator.
- **Follow up** your meeting with a note thanking them for the meeting, restating your concerns, and providing further information (if needed).

For more information, please contact Jen Estroff at (206) 324-0340 x21 or [jen@childrensalliance.org](mailto:jen@childrensalliance.org)

## Meeting Choreography

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- Remember your key message!
- Be flexible – your meeting may be shorter or longer than you expected; may take place in a smaller space than you expected; or could be with staff members instead of the policymaker themselves.

Thinking about filling the following roles will help set the flow – or “choreography” – for your meeting.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Who will start the meeting by thanking the policymaker and introducing your group?                                     |  |
| Who will briefly describe the issue?   |  |
| Who will help the policymaker understand why it is important to your group by sharing personal stories or experiences? |  |
| Who will give the policymaker a sense of why this issue should be important to them?                                   |  |
| Who will thank the policymaker and identify any follow-up actions/needs at the end of the meeting?                     |  |



# Do You Know Who You Know?

Who could you reach about the Initiatives?

How could you reach each group?

| <u>Group Name</u> | <u>Mode of Communication</u> | <u># in Group</u> |
|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|

## NEARBY GROUPS

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

TOTAL

## GROUPS WITH TIES ELSEWHERE IN THE STATE

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

TOTAL

**Note:** for this, groups can be small... informal... email lists...