



How to Advocate for Public Policy Change

SPAN advocates for laws and policies aimed at shattering the barriers to treatment, survival and recovery for people with schizophrenia. Your voice is critical to help us tell the stories of the discrimination people with this severe brain disease face every day.

Public policy advances can be achieved in many ways, including regulations and legislation at the federal, state and local levels. Being an effective advocate can make a major difference in educating lawmakers about issues that are important to our schizophrenia community and encouraging their support for change. This guide provides an overview of the most effective ways to advocate.

- **Know the issue yourself.** You don't have to be an expert, but make sure you know the important facts, including whether your concern is a federal, state or local issue. You can build on this knowledge with your lived experience, which will bring the issue to life for lawmakers.
- **Know your elected officials.** You can find your U.S. House and Senate members through an online search using your zip code (e.g., "US Congress member zip code 15201"). A similar search will identify your state lawmakers and relevant local officials. You'll be most effective if you contact the officials who represent your state or region, as it's their job to be responsive to constituents.
- **Write a letter.** Elected officials value hearing from constituents. Although a letter can take 2-3 weeks to arrive at the U.S. Capitol (all mail is opened offsite for security), hard-copy letters are still valuable. Consider sending a letter to the lawmaker's district office, as well. Addresses are available on lawmakers' websites. If they list an email address, feel free to send your letter that way if you prefer.



What should my letter say?

- **Briefly and clearly state your concerns upfront.** A clear message is an impactful one.
- **Get to the point.** Explain why the issue is important to you, then state your request. Do you want them to co-sponsor a specific bill? Vote for it? Write a bill? The more specific you are, the easier it is for them to be responsive.
- **Explain why the issue is important for them.** Make it local: provide information and statistics related to their district/state/city. Include any potential cost savings. Even if you are only describing a single incidence of injustice or problems with care, write about it. That counts!
- **Tell a personal story.** True stories about a constituent make the issue real and carry much weight.
- **Be brief.** Keep your letter to one page. Lawmakers receive many letters and emails; make yours the one they read from start to finish. If you want them to take action on a specific bill, provide the bill number and the names of co-sponsors. If you want them to write a bill, provide specific wording if you have it.
- **End with thanking them** for taking the time to read your letter and offer to speak with them or their staff. Sometimes a staff member will call you for more information.
- **Send the letter.** Communication only works if you communicate it!

Phone calls. Phone calls are important when a specific bill is coming up for a vote. A federal lawmaker's Washington office will have staff trained to understand the legislation, but the district office staff is often more responsive and attuned to the "pulse" of their district and state.

Should I ask for a meeting? Yes – especially if you are representing an organization and you can bring others. Don't worry about traveling to Washington. If you get a meeting in a federal lawmaker's district office, your voice will still be heard. When requesting a meeting, follow the same rules as when writing a letter. Ask to meet with the member and explain why. Don't worry if you meet with a staff member vs. the elected official. The staff are the ones who track all communications, advise the lawmaker and write the legislation.



What to do at a meeting.

First, thank them for their time. Then get right to the point.

- Share anecdotes that illustrate what the issue means to you and why it should matter to them. Include potential cost savings.
- Stick to the issue. You will have only a short time to make your case.
- Ask how you can help. The member may ask you to work with their staff to provide more information.
- Always follow up with a thank-you letter to whom you met with. If a staff member was particularly helpful, a letter to the lawmaker complimenting the staff member is valuable.

Be patient. Legislation takes time – but it’s also OK to communicate the cost of delaying change. With schizophrenia, delaying support costs money – and lives. Provide statistics about these costs whenever possible. (S&PAA can help with this.)

Follow up. Write an op-ed or letter to the editor of your local or state-level newspaper about the issue. State why it’s important and why you value lawmaker support for a specific bill. Tell a brief story about why it’s important for the communities the newspaper covers. The same goes for social media; consider writing a post about the issue whenever concerns about mental health/brain disease are in the news. Depending on the social media channel, you may be able to “tag” your elected official in your post.

What should I avoid doing?

- **Never get angry.** It’s OK to voice your frustration, especially if you have a personal story of the tragedies you’ve encountered. But always do so politely and as calmly as possible.
- **Never talk about campaigns or politics.** It’s against the law for elected officials to use their offices for campaign purposes, so avoid any discussion of campaign contributions or support.
- **Don’t go off message.** If the member asks about your position on other issues (especially divisive ones), simply restate your original concern. (“Thank you for asking our opinion, but today we are here to discuss an issue that is critical to people living with schizophrenia.”)
- **Don’t nag.** Repetition can be valuable, but if you contact the office every day, you become the person staff members want to avoid.



Stay in touch. An active elected official often attends parades and other public events. Feel free to say hello and re-introduce yourself on such occasions. Thank them again for meeting with you and remind them of the topic. (“Hello, Congresswoman Jones! Nice to see you here! You were kind enough to meet with me to discuss criminal justice diversion programs for people living with schizophrenia. Thank you!”) If you have enough time when you see them, go ahead and raise your concern again.

Invite the official to speak to your group, if applicable. If you are a member of a local advocacy organization, this can be very valuable. It doesn’t have to be an auditorium packed with people, but elected officials do understand the value of numbers. It goes a long way when you can gather multiple people to show concern for an issue. Send the member/staff some briefing materials ahead of the meeting.

Watch what you say elsewhere. The impact of many good conversations has been undermined by what a person says to others verbally or in a social media post. Members’ staff often will search your social posts, and any negative comments about officials or their political party can wipe out your impact in an instant.