

If you don't know who represents you in the Michigan House and Senate...

Look them up. An easy way to find out is through the League of Women Voters. <http://hg-salsa.wiredforchange.com/o/5950/getLocal.jsp> will help you find everyone you have a hand in electing, from the President to those representing you in your county, city or township. Included are members of the Michigan House and Senate and their contact information.

Sometimes your organization represents constituents who are served by additional policymakers. Look them up too. One useful tool to find out everyone who represents pieces of a larger geography, like a region of the state, a county or even some cities, is the *2015-2016 Citizen's Guide to State Government*. You can request this document from your legislator or find it online.

<http://www.legislature.mi.gov/Publications/CitizensGuide.pdf> This book has lots of great information, and on pages 16-27 there are lists of counties, cities and townships that indicate elected officials representing each place, in addition to maps that illustrate where districts are located.

If you know who your legislators are, but don't know anything about them...

Find out more. Because it is helpful to know something about anyone you are trying to teach or persuade, knowing even a little bit about policymakers is helpful before you talk to them. The easiest way to learn about them is through their websites, which you can find through the Michigan Legislature website. [http://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(ovroirf2maqggq3xbgwy30op\)\)/mileg.aspx?page=legislators](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(ovroirf2maqggq3xbgwy30op))/mileg.aspx?page=legislators) While you are on the Michigan Legislature website, look at the legislation they have sponsored and co-sponsored, as this gives you some indication of the issues that are important to them. Their websites will tell you what committees they sit on, which will also give you a good sense of what issues they are prioritizing in their work and likely spending the most time on. If you do nothing else, sign up for their email bulletins through their websites – everyone has them. And follow them on social media. This will give you some insight into what they are most proud of in their work and additional ways to communicate with them.

If you know who they are, and know a bit about them but have never expressed your opinion to them...

Start the conversation. Now is the time to help them get to know you, the issues that are of most concern to you, and the resources that you can bring from your work and life to help them in their work. This is also a great time to get to know them better – nothing like a conversation by phone, email or in person to better understand where someone is coming from and the experiences that have shaped their lives and work. Knowing that helps us think about how best to connect our concerns to their frame of reference.

One very effective strategy to start a conversation with your elected officials is to attend their coffee hours, which they advertise through all of their communications. Every legislator offers the opportunity to meet with constituents in their local districts, sometimes in multiple locations. The purpose of these meetings is for policymakers to hear directly from constituents, and they are often not well attended. It is a good time to bring others with you too, and to learn more from them.

If you HAVE expressed your opinion to them, and they disagreed or politely remained neutral...

Rethink your approach. Many times our elected officials, despite our best efforts, don't respond to us or act in the ways that we have urged them to. It is appropriate and essential to let them know that you were disappointed in something they did or said, and it is equally essential to make sure that we have done all that we could to help them understand our point of view. Re-thinking our approach to more effectively get our points across includes:

- Thinking about different messages – can we better tie our concern to something that they have expressed concern about like the economy or the state of education?
- Thinking of different messengers – are there others who could talk with them about similar concerns, like parents, business or other community leaders?
- Trying a different delivery – maybe we need to think about inviting our policymakers to see great programming in action or talk directly with people who are receiving the critical services we are working to protect and expand.

This is the more difficult part. You should let them know you are disappointed, but make sure that you also let them know that you look forward to working with them in the future. There is no room for grudges in policy advocacy – policymakers are making decisions on thousands of topics, and because they didn't respond the way you wanted them to this time doesn't mean they won't do better next time. Making an enemy of your policymakers definitely won't help your cause.

If you HAVE expressed your opinion to them, and they agreed/were positive...

Go the next step. We are glad when policymakers tell us they are supportive of what we are saying, and we need more from them than that. We need them to act on that support by talking with their colleagues, working on legislation or appropriations asks if necessary, talking about our issues through their own communications channels like their newsletters and websites, and championing our issue above their other priorities. Unless we ask more from them and follow-up to make sure that they have done those things, our requests can get lost in the shuffle, even with well-intentioned policymakers.

MORE SPECIFICALLY: If they serve on a critical committee or not...

Adjust your message.

If they ARE on a critical committee who is talking about the issue or would be the space to have the conversation in the Legislature, YOUR CONVERSATION IS INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT. While committee members are supposed to listen to statewide constituents on the issues they are deciding, in reality, all legislators listen more closely to their constituents. Your ability to tie the issue directly to their community that they represent is critical and of huge benefit to the conversation.

However, great communication can be powerful for policymakers NOT serving on related committees too. One of the best messengers for Legislators are other Legislators. When we talk with policymakers who may not directly be involved in committee conversations about the issues, they can still communicate the information more broadly through their own newsletters or the media, and most importantly they can champion the issue with their colleagues. In addition, as part of a network, you can offer to connect constituents directly with other legislators who are in more influential positions.

Most importantly, start talking to your elected officials and keep talking!