

Top Ten Tips for Calling Your Members of Congress and Their Staff

Calling the offices of Members of Congress is one of the easiest and most effective ways for the medical simulation community to speak with policymakers on issues of interest and priority. Such a phone call, if done correctly, can result in garnering support from Members.

When calling policymakers, do so on your own time and with your own phone, as your employer might not share your views on the topic. While calling the local offices of your Members of Congress does not involve a long-distance call, it is best to contact their Washington, DC offices, as they are better equipped to handle a greater volume of constituent calls, and most policy staff are located in the Capitol Hill office, not in the district.

To reach the offices of your two senators and your representative in the House, just call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202/224-3121, and ask to be transferred to their offices. If you are not sure who represents you, just visit www.senate.gov and www.house.gov to learn your policymakers' names, or ask the Capitol Hill Operator to assist you.

Be sure to keep a record of the date and time of your call(s), and the person with whom you spoke or for whom you left a message. Sometimes the phone logs are lost, and you may need to follow-up with the office to ensure a response.

Top Ten Tips:

- 1. Once connected to your elected official's office, identify yourself as a constituent to the receptionist.** Clearly state your first and last name, your hometown, and why you are calling. If you know the health legislative assistant (HLA), be sure to ask for that staffer by name. If not, ask for the staffer's name, and request to be transferred. Sometimes, the receptionist will indicate that you will need to leave your comments with him/her. If that is the case, you still should ask for the name of the HLA, so that you have that information, and record it for future reference.
- 2. If transferred to the HLA personally,** or if you are put into the staffer's voicemail, reintroduce yourself and immediately identify the topic you are calling to discuss. If you are instructed to leave a message with the receptionist, repeat your name and continue with your message that you wish to deliver.
- 3. Make a few brief points** as to why the issue is of concern to you, your community, and the nation, and why the Member should take action. You may want to use written notes to help you stay on topic and remain clear, while articulating your case.
- 4. Be clear as to what you are asking the Member to do** (e.g., cosponsor a particular bill, vote for or against a specific measure, sign a "Dear Colleague" letter).
- 5. Be polite in your tone and language.** The staffer on the other end of the phone is overworked, overwhelmed, underpaid, and receives dozens – if not hundreds – of calls a day. In fact, in some offices, you may be speaking with a junior staffer or a college intern, so be sure to be patient and forgiving. Also, be sure not to use any "lingo" or "slang". You should not assume the person on the

other end of the phone is familiar with the issue you are discussing, so be as clear and concise as possible.

6. **Keep it brief.** Limit your call to no more than five minutes, unless the staffer asks you questions and seems engaged in the discussion. Offer to send additional or follow-up information to the staffer, and request their preferred mode of communication (e.g. e-mail, fax).
7. **Specifically request a written response** from the office on the Member's position or action on the issue you addressed.
8. **Provide your full name**, mailing address, e-mail address, and telephone number.
9. **Thank the staffer** for his/her time, and indicate that you appreciate his/her willingness to listen and record your comments. Be sure to record the name of the staffer and the day and time you spoke, so you can have it for future use and in case you need to follow up.
10. **If you do not receive a response within a reasonable timeframe** (approximately a month), either call or write to follow-up and request a response. Reference your phone call, and mention with whom you spoke and the topic to help facilitate a meaningful reply.

Other Tips

If you receive the voicemail for a staffer or the office, be sure to leave a brief, clear message for the staffer (noting his/her name down for future reference) – providing your full name, contact information, and the nature of your call and specific request; be clear that you would like a return call and/or a letter from the Member on the topic about which you are calling.

Be sure to keep in touch with the offices of your Members of Congress to establish a relationship, and make yourself available as a local resource on medical simulation and patient safety related issues. There are times when you and an elected official will have to “agree to disagree,” but over time, you also may find that the policymaker may be supportive and helpful on other matters.

Also, you can reach your Members of Congress in the following ways:

- E-mail your U.S. representative through: <http://www.house.gov/writerep>;
- E-mail your two U.S. senators through: <http://www.senate.gov>