

Top Ten Tips for Writing to Your Members of Congress and Their Staff

Writing to Members of Congress is one of the easiest and most effective ways for the medical simulation community to communicate with Policymakers on important issues. The communication can be done by e-mail, or by mailing or faxing a letter to the Congressional office. Such written correspondence, if done correctly, can result in support for AIMS' public policy priorities.

When writing to policymakers, be sure to use personal stationery, or your personal e-mail account, as your employer might not share your views. For all forms of communication, be sure to include your full name, return mailing address, e-mail address, and phone number.

Be sure to keep a hard copy of what you send, as faxes, e-mails and letters are sometimes lost, and you may need to send a second copy to ensure a response.

Specific Tips About "Snail Mail"

As a result of the fall 2001 anthrax attack, the way in which U.S. Postal Service mail is handled by Congress has changed. Most of the incoming mail is irradiated to ensure that it is safe for handling by congressional staff and Members of Congress. This process takes quite a while and often damages the contents of the mail. Therefore, for time-sensitive communication, sending written correspondence by e-mail or fax is advised. Also, enclosing items such as photographs, originals of articles, or other documents is not recommended; it is best to save these items for hand-delivery when you have a meeting in the office.

Specific Tips About E-Mail

Each Congressional office maintains a different policy about how e-mail from constituents is handled. Most Members of Congress have a public e-mail address. To access the e-mail addresses, you can visit the individual member's Web page at either www.house.gov or www.senate.gov. Many Congressional offices provide a generic, automatic acknowledgement that your e-mail has been received, but then will follow up with either a specific e-mail response, or a letter via regular U.S. Postal Service. A handful of offices do not respond individually to e-mail, but keep track of how many people have written in on a particular topic. It is best to contact your members' offices to learn about their individual policies about constituent correspondence.

Top Ten Tips:

1. Always be polite. When addressing correspondence to any government official, be sure to use the proper forms of address (see the end of this document). Even if you are angry, frustrated or disappointed, be sure to use a polite tone and appropriate language; be sure not to be threatening, confrontational, or rude. The most effective way to communicate with your Members of Congress is the way you communicate with your colleagues, neighbors, family, and friends — clearly, concisely, and with respect and honesty.
2. Be clear about who you are and why you are writing. In the opening sentence, make your request

clear and identify yourself as a registered voter and constituent. If you know the member or staff aide, say so at the beginning of your message; this may alert the staffer to give your message special attention. If you are in a leadership position and have clearance to write in that capacity, be sure to use your title and indicate how many people you represent.

3. Be concise and informed. If possible, try to keep your letter to a single page. You do not need to be an expert on the issue, but you should be familiar with the basic facts (e.g., name of the legislation and the associated bill number, and why it should be supported or opposed). If you are requesting that the policymaker cosponsor a particular measure or are writing to express disappointment at a particular vote, check the list of cosponsors and the vote record first at <http://thomas.loc.gov/> to ensure that your information is up-to-date and accurate.
4. Personalize your message. Remember, you are an expert in the medical simulation community; and, as such, you have many experiences to share. Tell your own story, and explain the relevance to the issue at hand. Although form letters and postcards are “counted,” they often do not elicit a response from a Congressional office. Personal stories and illustrations of local impact are more easily remembered by policymakers and their staff than statistics and generic examples. Moreover, personal stories are often what spur policymakers into action—not statistics. The reality is that our policymakers often legislate by anecdote. Your own words are best and can influence the legislator’s response or vote. If you are using a template letter (like those provided at www.medsim.org), please take a few moments to personalize it with your own experience. Also, if you can, include relevant state or local information to explain how the issue affects your community and/or practice.
5. Be honest, accurate and clear. If you are including statistics or other scientific information, be sure to verify your sources and have them handy in case the Congressional offices follow up and request additional information. Also, be sure not to exaggerate the situation you are discussing; do not oversell the policy solution you are advocating, or overstate the consequences if the policymaker does not do what you request. Make sure you do not use any “lingo” or “slang” (e.g. do not use acronyms in your letter like “TATRC,” unless you first write out what it means – the Telemedicine and Advanced Technology Research Center).
6. Be modest in your request. Although you may wish to address multiple issues, be sure not to “kitchen-sink” in your communication. It is best to focus on only one or two issues that are of top priority to you. Your communication will be clearer, and policymakers or staffers will be more receptive, because you have not bombarded them with too many requests.
7. Be of assistance and serve as a resource. Policymakers and their staffers are overworked and overwhelmed, so offer them your assistance; they will appreciate your input and help. If you have an article of interest or relevance, be sure to include it with your correspondence, or refer to it, and indicate that you would be happy to provide it, should they be interested.
8. Express appreciation. Too many times we forget to say thank you. If in response to earlier correspondence you receive a letter informing you that the member shares your views or took the action you requested, write back expressing your thanks for the response and support. Or, if you learn that the policymaker recently cosponsored a bill you support or voted the way you hoped, send a letter expressing your pleasure at his/her action. At the close of your correspondence, be sure to acknowledge and thank the member for his or her attention to your concerns.
9. Ask for a response. Because policymakers and their staffers work for you, you have every right to

(politely) ask for a response, and hold them accountable if your communication goes unanswered. In fact, entire systems, processes, and staff exist in Congressional offices to respond to constituent input. It is important to note, however, that because of the volume of constituent input, it could be weeks or month before you receive a response. Make clear at the close of your correspondence that you are requesting a written response regarding the policymaker's views on the issue or legislation you addressed.

10. Be sure to follow up. If you do not receive a response in a timely fashion (in excess of a month for most offices, a little bit longer for senators from large states like California and Texas), be sure to follow up. Contact the office by phone or with another letter (fax is best) with your original attached, and indicate you have not received a response, and you are requesting one. If you receive an unsatisfactory response to your correspondence, you should write or call again to express appreciation for the response and politely, yet firmly, communicate that the response was not what you anticipated or requested. Reiterate your concerns and address any points the policymaker has made on the issue in the correspondence.

Other Tips

Keep in touch with the offices of your Members of Congress, so as to establish a relationship and make yourself available as a local resource on medical simulation and patient safety. 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.

Proper forms of address for Members of Congress

Members of the United States House of Representatives

The Honorable [First name Last name of Member of Congress] United States House of Representatives Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative [Last name of Member]:

United States Senators

The Honorable [First name Last name of Member of Congress] United States Senate Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator [Last name of Member]:

You can reach your members of Congress in the following ways:

- Ü Phone through the U.S. Capitol switchboard at 202.224.3121
- Ü E-mail your U.S. Representative through: <http://www.house.gov/writerep>
- Ü E-mail both of your two U.S. Senators by looking up their contact information through: <http://www.senate.gov>