

## Testifying Before a Committee

*How will I know they're listening?  
And, if they are, will they really care?*

**A**lthough some skeptics say that committee testimony is nothing more than window-dressing and that the real case for your position should have been made with individual committee members prior to the meeting, this is not necessarily true. Personal contacts prior to the meeting can greatly strengthen your case, and you should make every effort to do this. However, whether or not you have made these personal contacts, the point is this: testimony is always helpful. At times, it is indispensable. Committee meetings, or hearings, are the public forums for public comment on the public's business. You need to be there to show support for the bill that is being considered at that time. If you are the only or primary interest that has requested a bill, it is your responsibility to generate support necessary to even secure a hearing. Once you are aware that a hearing has been scheduled, begin to prepare for it.

### **Consider the following as you prepare:**

- ◆ Determine what you need to emphasize to make an impact on the committee. Members generally like to have some expert testimony and some anecdotal testimony. The former focuses on technical provisions of a bill (if there are any) and the latter on how passage of the bill will affect people on a personal basis, including how the present law has presented difficulties or has not addressed concerns. Anecdotal testimony by a person who has experienced the conditions firsthand can be particularly compelling.
- ◆ Because public speaking can be threatening, do not “force” people to testify if they do not wish to do so even if you believe they have information that would strengthen your position. Select your witnesses carefully.
- ◆ You must call ahead to secure a place on the agenda.
- ◆ Hold a mock hearing. This is especially important for persons who do not appear before committees on a regular basis. Give your presentation and answer questions you anticipate members of the committee will ask. With this exercise, you and other supporters will feel more comfortable about the upcoming committee hearing.
- ◆ Arrive 15 to 20 minutes early on the day of the meeting, especially if this is the first time you have visited the capitol or the building where the hearing is scheduled. This will give you an opportunity to get a good seat and check the agenda to make sure you are on it. Early arrival also allows time for holding any last-minute conversations with fellow supporters or, on occasion, legislators or staff.
- ◆ Know the committee protocol and style of the chair. “Mr. Chair” or “Madam Chair” are the most acceptable forms of addressing the chair of the committee. “Senator X” or “Representative X” are the most acceptable forms of addressing other members.

The chair of the committee sets the tone of the committee. Some chairs conduct meetings in a very formal manner; whereas others keep a very informal atmosphere. You may consider the formal style too restrictive and rigid, or the informal style too undisciplined. Either is

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acceptable and must be adapted to.

Incidentally, our capitol and surrounding areas are rich in state history, art, and architectural design. Free tours are available throughout the day. You may find that exposure to the legislative environment will enhance your desire to participate in the process.

### **When the chair calls on you to present your testimony, remember the following:**

- ◆ You must, in nearly every instance, provide written testimony with sufficient copies for the committee members. The committee secretary can tell you the number of copies you will need. However, DO NOT read your testimony. Use it as a guide in providing your oral remarks.
- ◆ After addressing the chair, introduce yourself. Give your name and address (city or town only). If you are representing an organization, give its name and a very brief description of the organization. Be cautious not to spend too much time talking about your organization hoping to convince the committee that the support of the particular organization is as important as substantive remarks.
- ◆ Keep your remarks short (usually three to five minutes will do unless it is a complicated bill). Tell the committee why the bill is needed and how it will change current law, if it does. An appropriations or finance committee also will want to know how much enactment of the bill will cost to implement. A policy committee may or may not wish to delve into cost. Either way, if this information is requested you should share if it is available.
- ◆ Tell the committee who will be directly affected by the bill. Share anecdotes, or better yet, personal experiences that show the need for the bill.
- ◆ Indicate your willingness to respond to questions and when asked a question, respond calmly. Do not wander off by commenting on matters that are not a part of the question. Do not let a hostile question upset you. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. Tell the committee you will attempt to get the answer, and then do so.
- ◆ Thank the chair and members for having had the opportunity to testify and indicate a willingness to respond to questions.