

# Guidelines for Giving Testimony

## Before Legislative Committees

As a citizen, you have a right to voice your opinions on any issue being discussed by Congress, your state legislature or local government. In addition to writing letters and meeting one on one with officials, you have the right to offer your opinions – or testimony on pending legislation before a legislative committee.

1. Giving testimony before a legislative committee can be very intimidating. It is also very important. Here are **seven things you should know**:

- a. **Know the committee protocol.** That includes:
  - i. **How to address the chair.** The committee chair is generally addressed as “Mr. Chair” or “Madam Chair”. Other members should be addressed as “Senator Jones” or “Representative Smith”.
  - ii. **How to 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.

If there are many people present to give testimony, the committee may ask that the organization choose one member to speak on behalf of the organization;  
Anticipate that your testimony time will be limited to three minutes and plan accordingly.
- b. **How to clearly state your case** and support it with your personal story.
  - i. Don't try to bring in other issues or change the world. Stay focused on the topic at hand.
  - ii. Never read your testimony.
  - iii. If there are many people present to give testimony and your points have been covered, be respectful of the committee's time and either revise your testimony or simply state that you agree/support the testimony that has been heard.
- c. **How to support your case with a few meaningful facts** that help move the issue beyond how you, as an individual, are impacted.
- d. **How to ask for what you want.**
- e. **How to respond to questions from committee members.**
  - i. Respond calmly. Do not wander off by commenting on matters that are not part of the question.
  - ii. Do not let a hostile question upset you.
  - iii. 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.
  - iv. Follow protocol, if a committee member asks you a question, acknowledge the Chairperson before responding to the person who asked

the question. Always state the questioner's formal title and last name before you answer his or her question.

f. **How to end your testimony.** Thank the chair and members. Leave a summary of your testimony if you have prepared one. Make enough copies for everyone on the committee.

g. **How to relax!** The committee members are people, just like you. They understand this can be an intimidating experience. They don't expect perfection.

2. Like any good presentation, advance preparation is essential. Try these techniques to boost your confidence and effectiveness.

a. Attend a committee meeting before you testify to become familiar with the process. Or you can watch a hearing on C-SPAN.

b. Note if certain members seem to focus on specific issues.

c. Hold a mock hearing. Give your presentation and answer questions you anticipate being asked.

d. Bring enough copies of your prepared testimony to leave with legislators.

e. Learn who the committee members are to help you understand what questions or issues might come up.

3. Getting on the Agenda.

a. Contact your state legislature or check related web sites to find out when hearings are being held on the bill or proposed legislation you're interested in. These sources will also be able to tell you how to get on the agenda to testify.

b. Arrive 15 minutes early. Use the extra time to acclimate yourself and get a front-row seat to watch the proceedings.

c. If you need help, ask. The legislative process is intended to be accessible to all citizens.