

#CounselorsAdvocate



# ACA ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

Stay informed  
Share your story

Take Action  
ACA Voter Voice



## About the American Counseling Association (ACA)

The American Counseling Association (ACA) is the world's largest association exclusively representing professional counselors in various practice settings. Our vision is to ensure that every person has access to quality professional counseling to thrive.

### **Professional counselors are ACA's strongest advocates.**

The participation of professional counselors in ACA's advocacy efforts is critical because of their expertise in the counseling profession. As experts in counseling, professional counselors can effectively explain how bills or state licensure board regulations affect counselors and those they serve. This is very helpful to decision-makers—who may lack knowledge and/or expertise on a topic—prior to voting in favor of or against a bill or regulation.

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*Every important change in our society, for the good, at least, has taken place because of popular pressure—pressure from below, from the great mass of people.*

—**Edward Abbey**, American author and activist

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## How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is for ACA advocates and counseling community supporters like you. The information provided in this toolkit prepares you to effectively meet with your elected representatives and licensing or regulatory board members to advocate and lobby for their support of your cause on federal, state and local levels. Included in the toolkit are resources for presenting testimony at federal and state hearings, licensing and regulatory board hearings, as well as advocacy strategies for communicating via social media, email, phone calls, planned advocacy days and in-person events.



## Advocacy vs. lobbying: The same, but different

The ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy team advocates on behalf of ACA members and the counseling profession on a range of issues, including (but not limited to) Medicare reimbursement, licensure portability and funding for school counseling programs.

Advocacy is the process of stakeholders using their voices to make policy-makers at the local, state and national levels of government aware of the issues that impact them. Lobbying is the use of methods and procedures to support or discourage the passage of specific legislation.



### Advocacy Examples

- Sharing with a Member of Congress how an insurance program adversely affects their constituents' access to quality mental health care.
- Educating a Member of Congress about the effects of a policy on their constituents.
- Inviting a Member of Congress or state legislator for a site visit so that they can observe how their policies impact their constituents.



### Lobby Examples

- Asking a Member of Congress to vote for or against, or amend, introduced legislation.
- Emailing a “call to action” to your network of supporters urging them to contact their Member of Congress to request action on introduced legislation or pending regulations.
- Preparing materials or organizing events to support lobbying activities.

Source: *National Council on Aging, “How to Advocate as a Nonprofit for Older Americans.”*  
<https://www.ncoa.org/article/how-to-advocate-as-a-nonprofit-for-older-americans>



# Legislative Issues

## Know before you go

In many instances, legislators have numerous issues and bills to consider for their support. Legislators and staffers must know about a wide range of issues—and you may be bringing one they are not familiar with. Sometimes these issues do not receive much attention until a vote is coming up. Therefore, it can be an advantage if you are the first one to discuss a particular issue with legislators and their staff.

While you are the expert on the counseling side of the issue, you are not required to be an expert on everything that may come up. Therefore, if you encounter a question during your meeting for which you do not have an answer, it is acceptable to say, “I do not know the answer, but I will follow up with you to provide the information.” Never make up an answer.

Providing inaccurate information can impair your credibility.

### To learn more about the issue(s):

- Visit the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy web page at [counseling.org/government-affairs/public-policy](https://www.counseling.org/government-affairs/public-policy).
- Federal Issues ([counseling.org/government-affairs/federal-issues](https://www.counseling.org/government-affairs/federal-issues))
- State Issues ([counseling.org/government-affairs/state-issues](https://www.counseling.org/government-affairs/state-issues))
- Read the legislation, which can be found on [congress.gov/search](https://www.congress.gov/search) or on the website of your state legislature (or general assembly). Find your state legislature’s website at [congress.gov/state-legislature-websites](https://www.congress.gov/state-legislature-websites).
- Track federal or state legislation online by searching on “[federal/state] political news” to find websites that track political information.
- Follow state legislation using the bill tracker on your state legislature’s web page, or use [legiscan.com](https://www.legiscan.com) or [openstates.org](https://www.openstates.org) to follow bills.
- Visit the “Take Action” page on [counseling.org](https://www.counseling.org) to view and participate in the latest ACA VoterVoice campaigns.

During your preparation and research, gather statistics and data that support and oppose your position. It is important to anticipate counterarguments so that you can address them (if necessary) during your meeting with your legislator.



## Know who your elected representatives are

Prior to meeting with a Member of Congress or a state legislator, read the representative's bio and research their:

- district(s),
- committee assignments,
- number of terms served,
- voting record, and
- position on the issue.



This information is available at [congress.gov/members](https://www.congress.gov/members).

### **Find a champion in the legislature who will support you.**

- Learn about the committee your bill was—or will be—referred to.
- Learn about the members and chair of that committee. They are going to have the most say about what happens to the measure.
- If your elected representative is not on the appropriate committee or in the majority party, look for another potential champion who is, but start with your representative.
- If you are not a constituent of a potential champion, try to find someone who is and ask them for help.

### **Stay informed.**

- Get on the email lists maintained by your legislators.
- Follow your legislators on social media.
- Check the ACA Government Affairs and Public Policy web page at [counseling.org/government-affairs](https://www.counseling.org/government-affairs) for information.
- Visit the “Take Action” page on [counseling.org](https://www.counseling.org) to view and participate in the latest ACA VoterVoice campaigns.



# Advocacy Strategies

## Write. Call. Meet ... *and share your story.*

Communications tools are used by advocates to deliver messages to decision-makers and to share and exchange essential information with other advocates.

There are various ways to contact your Members of Congress, state representatives and regulators to discuss issues. In addition to phone calls, elected officials may prefer electronic communications from constituents. (Postal mail to Members of Congress is significantly delayed due to security procedures in place to screen incoming mail.) Many members have online contact forms on their official websites to enable constituents to share their policy opinion(s) and questions.

### **Writing to your legislators.**

Writing to your legislators is a personal and effective method to educate and engage your elected representatives about your issue. A written communication (preferably via email) will likely motivate your legislator to respond to your targeted request.

- After introducing yourself, begin with the purpose for writing your email or letter.
- Identify any specific legislation relevant to your correspondence. Make sure that you reference the legislation to the correct body of Congress.
  - House bills should be written as “H.R. \_\_\_\_”
  - Senate bills are “S. \_\_\_\_”
- To eliminate any risk of confusion of one issue with another, you should address only one issue per email or letter.
- Include any personal information or narrative about the importance of the issue to you and your clients.
- Ask the legislator to support or oppose the targeted legislation.
- Regardless of the topic or your personal opinion of the legislator, always be courteous.



**Address the correspondence as follows:**

U.S. Senator

The Honorable (Full Name)  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (Last Name)

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State Senator

The Honorable (Full Name)  
[State] State Senate  
City, State ZIP Code

Dear Senator (Last Name)

U.S. Representative

The Honorable (Full Name)  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear “Mr./Mrs./Ms./Mx.” or “Representative”  
(Last Name)

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State Delegate

The Honorable (Full Name)  
[State] House of Delegates  
City, State ZIP Code

Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms./Mx./Dr. (Last Name)



**When writing to the chair of a committee or to the Speaker of the House, address them as follows:**

Dear Madam Chairwoman or Mr. Chairman  
or Chairperson:

Dear Madam Speaker or Mr. Speaker or  
Speaker:



## Letter to legislator(s) sample template

Date

Your Name  
Your Address  
Your City, State, ZIP Code  
Your Email Address  
Your Phone Number

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States Senate or United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20510 (Senate)/20515 (House of Representatives)

Dear Senator/Representative \_\_\_\_\_:

Body of the Letter

Introduce yourself and include personal information, such as your counseling specialty and the types of clients you treat.

Next, state your purpose for writing. If you are writing about pending legislation, be sure to include the bill name and the bill number.

Be sure to include relevant facts that make your case, such as: Research has shown that ... (insert data and statistics here).

Tell a personal story that clearly illustrates the way their constituents are affected by the issue. For example, (insert a story or example(s) of those affected by your issue).

End the letter with your request: I ask that you support/oppose H.R. XX or S. XX (insert the full name of the bill here). Briefly restate what the effect of supporting /opposing this bill will be for professional counselors, clients and/or constituents).

Sincerely,  
(Signature)  
Your Name