



Advocacy Toolkit

counseling.org/government-affairs



COUNSELORS ADVOCATE

**American Counseling
Association**

About ACA

The American Counseling Association is a not-for-profit, professional and educational organization dedicated to the growth and enhancement of the counseling profession. Founded in 1952, 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.

There are 18 chartered divisions within the American Counseling Association (ACA). These divisions provide leadership, resources and information unique to specialized areas and/or principles of counseling. ACA has four regions (Midwest, North Atlantic, Southern and Western) and 56 chartered branches in the United States, Europe and Latin America.



COUNSELORS ADVOCATE

**American Counseling
Association**

What is Advocacy

Advocacy is the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal. ACA focuses on two types of advocacy: (1) issue advocacy and (2) legislative advocacy.

“Issue” advocacy promotes a particular position on an issue that is, usually, supported by interest groups, rather than candidates. “Legislative” advocacy involves using methods and procedures to support or discourage the passage of legislation. The act of lobbying legislators may be the most popularly known type of legislative advocacy.

For ACA, this involves ACA members and supporters contacting their legislator(s) to communicate a stance on legislation and ask for their representatives’ support (or opposition) for the legislation. These direct lobbying efforts have proven to be effective to increase the likelihood of securing time with particular legislators.

Why professional counselors should advocate.

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 are able to effectively explain how bills or state licensure board regulations affect counselors and those they serve. This can be very helpful to decision-makers—who may lack knowledge and/or expertise on the topic—prior to voting in favor of, or against, a bill (legislators) or regulation (state regulators).

Because legislators may lack knowledge of, and expertise in, the counseling profession or may have multiple (often hundreds or thousands) of pieces of legislation to review, it is vital that professional counselors clarify the intricate differences between licensed professional counselors (LPCs) and other mental and behavioral health professionals (social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists). These nuances are important, as professional counselors advocate for legislators’ support on bills that positively impact LPCs. Moreover, elected officials have a vested interest in issues that affect their constituency, while administrative agencies (most notably, licensure and regulatory boards) have a vested interest in monitoring and maintaining requirements for the counseling profession.



COUNSELORS ADVOCATE

**American Counseling
Association**

About this toolkit

This toolkit focuses on legislative advocacy and prepares you to effectively meet with your elected representatives and licensing and regulatory board members to advocate and lobby for their support of your cause on federal, state, and local levels. The information provided is also applicable to advocacy efforts, such as presenting testimony at licensing and regulatory board hearings.

The advocacy strategies presented in this toolkit involve communicating with your legislators and regulatory board members via social media, e-mail, phone calls, planned advocacy days and when attending events where your legislator or licensing or regulator board member is present.



COUNSELORS ADVOCATE

American Counseling
Association

Know the issues

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 on it. 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 every 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).
 - [ACA Federal Issues](https://www.counseling.org/government-affairs/federal-issues) ([counseling.org/government-affairs/federal-issues](https://www.counseling.org/government-affairs/federal-issues))
 - [ACA State Issues](https://www.counseling.org/government-affairs/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 your state’s general assembly website. Find your state Legislature information at: [congress.gov/state-legislature-websites](https://www.congress.gov/state-legislature-websites)
- Track legislation online: Google “[federal/state] political news” to find websites that track political information.
- State legislation: Follow specific bills on your state Legislature’s bill-tracker, which may be found on the state’s home page. Or, use [legiscan.com](https://www.legiscan.com) or [openstates.org](https://www.openstates.org) to follow bills.
- Check the [American Counseling Association Government Affairs](#) page on [counseling.org](https://www.counseling.org) for information.
- Visit the [“Take Action”](#) page on [counseling.org](https://www.counseling.org) to view and participate in the latest ACA Voter Voice campaigns.

During your preparation and research, gather statistics and data that support and oppose your position. It is important to anticipate counter-arguments to your position so that you are able to address and invalidate them (if necessary) during your meeting with your legislator.



COUNSELORS ADVOCATE

**American Counseling
Association**

Know your legislators

Prior to meeting with a legislator, read her or his bio and research her or his district(s), committee assignments, number of terms served, voting record, and/or position on the issue. This information is available at/accessible from: [congress.gov/members](https://www.congress.gov/members)

Find a champion in the Legislature who will support you.

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

Get and stay informed.

- Get on the e-mail lists maintained by your legislators.
- Follow your legislators on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube).
- Check the [American Counseling Association Government Affairs and Public Policy](https://www.counseling.org/government-affairs) page on [counseling.org/government-affairs](https://www.counseling.org/government-affairs) for information.
- Visit the [“Take Action”](https://www.counseling.org/take-action) page on [counseling.org](https://www.counseling.org) to view and participate in the latest ACA Voter Voice campaigns.



COUNSELORS ADVOCATE

American Counseling
Association

Advocacy strategies

- 1) 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.

- 2) Addressing correspondence to legislators.

United States Senator	United States Representative
The Honorable (Full Name) United States Senate Washington, DC 20510	The Honorable (Full Name) United States House of Representatives Washington, DC 20515
Dear Senator (Last Name)	Dear "Mr./Mrs./Ms." or "Representative" (Last Name)

State Senator	State Delegate
The Honorable (Full Name) United States Senate City, State ZIP Code	The Honorable (Full Name) United States House of Representatives City, State ZIP Code
Dear Senator (Last Name)	Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. (Last Name)

*When writing to the Chair of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, s/he should be addressed as follows:

Dear Madam Chairwoman or Mr. Chairman:

Dear Madam Speaker or Mr. Speaker:

- 3) 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 will likely motivate your legislator to respond to your targeted request.

- After introducing yourself, begin with the purpose for writing your e-mail or letter.
- Identify any specific legislation relevant to your correspondence. Make sure that you correctly 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 only address one issue per e-mail or letter.
- Include any personal information or narrative about the importance of the issue to you and your clients. Ask the member to support or oppose the targeted legislation.
- Regardless of the topic or your personal opinion of the legislator, always be courteous.



Letter to Legislator(s) Sample Template

Date

Your Name

Your Address

Your City, State, ZIP Code

Your E-mail Address

Your Phone Number

The Honorable _____

United States Senate

Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator _____:

OR

The Honorable _____

United States House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

Dear 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



**American Counseling
Association**

Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube)

Social media provides opportunities for legislators to share information about governmental operations and public policy, which supports the fundamental democratic role while also permitting them to fulfill their representation duties of communicating with their constituency. Legislators may use social media to solicit constituent opinions to help them formulate positions on policy issues. Follow your legislators on social media and use the information shared on their social media accounts to attend events, schedule meetings, take action, and stay informed on their legislative agendas.

Calling your legislators.

Calling your elected representative(s) is arguably the easiest way to communicate with them, as it requires very little effort on the advocate's part. It is important to note that representatives' offices receive many calls daily and it is impossible to put a face with a name, making these advocacy efforts easily forgettable.

Be aware that your call will most likely be answered by a staffer (individuals who assist the legislator or representative during her or his term).

Identify yourself as a constituent (only if you are a constituent) and ask to speak with the legislative aide assigned to the issue that you are calling about.

When speaking with the aide, be sure to identify the legislation you are calling about and your position on the legislation (support or oppose).

Be prepared to briefly provide strong and sufficient reasoning for your support or opposition to the bill.

Ask for your legislator's position on the bill. You may also request a written response to your call.

In-person meeting.

Meeting with your legislator is a valuable grassroots advocacy effort. A legislator may be more likely to respond to your request if they can put a face to your name or cause, which can create a champion you can call on later.

1. **Plan your visit.** Review the [legislative calendar](#) to know when Congress or a state general assembly is in session. That is the time when the legislators are more likely to be on Capitol Hill or at the state capital, rather than in their district. If you're meeting during a recess period, you are more likely to meet with a staffer, who will have more time for a meeting. If possible, schedule your meeting(s) on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday.
2. **Make an appointment.** Schedule your meeting with the legislator at least one month in advance, as their schedule fills up quickly. If she or he is not available, arrange to meet with the staffer who directly handles your issue (usually the health care staffer).

Contact the appointment secretary/scheduler to schedule your meeting. Let the appointment secretary/scheduler know that you are a member of the American Counseling Association. Be sure to say the full name of the organization. Keep in mind that ACA is also the acronym for the Affordable Care Act, as well as for many other organizations. Include the purpose of your meeting request. It is easier for staff to schedule a meeting if they know what you want to discuss and your affiliation to the area of interests represented by the legislator.



COUNSELORS ADVOCATE

American Counseling
Association

3. **Be punctual.** Arrive at the office at least five minutes prior to your meeting. If you are going from meeting to meeting, make sure you have enough time between meetings to get there. This is important because you never want the legislator or their staff to think that you don't value their time.
4. **Be patient.** There are times when your legislator or the staffer you are scheduled to meet with may be running late due to a previous meeting or action on the legislative floor.
5. **Be prepared.** As soon as your meeting commences, be prepared to discuss your issue and your position. Be sure to highlight important details, such as statistics about how this issue affects the legislator's district and constituents. Prior to completing your meeting, provide to the legislator or staffer any information (one-pagers) that you have on the issue, along with your contact information. Also, share how you and/or your organization can provide expertise on the issue to the legislators. Lastly, ask for a commitment on your request from your legislator or staffer.
6. **Debrief.** If you are with a larger group that met with different individuals during the day, get together afterward and share what you learned, including: which legislators and staffers seemed supportive or unsupportive of your issue, what you learned about the prospects for your bill, next steps, etc. (Create and use a one-page evaluation sheet for each meeting to help preserve that information.) If getting together is not possible, designate someone to receive everyone's meeting results.
7. **Follow-up.** Send the legislator or the appropriate staffer a "thank you" letter by mail or email. Thank them for meeting with you and for their commitment. Stay in contact with the legislator and the staffer you spoke with. Send an article that would be relevant to your conversation, for example. This ensures that there will be an open line of communication, if and when you would like to set up a meeting with them in the future.