



Oncology Nursing Society

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TOP TEN TIPS FOR CALLING CONGRESS

Calling the offices of Members of Congress is one of the easiest and most effective ways for oncology nurses to communicate with policymakers on issues of interest and priority. If done correctly, a phone call can result in garnering support for the Oncology Nursing Society's (ONS's) public policy priorities.

When calling policymakers, be sure to do so on your own time and with your own phone because your employer might not share your views on the topic. Although calling the local offices of your Members of Congress does not involve a long-distance call, it is best to contact their Washington, DC, offices where they are better equipped to handle a greater volume of constituent calls. In addition, most policy staff are located in the Capitol Hill office, not in the district.

To reach the offices of your two Senators and your Representative in the House, just call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121 and ask to be transferred to their offices. If you are not sure who represents you, just visit www.senate.gov and www.house.gov to learn your policymakers' names.

Keep a record of the date and time of your call(s) and the person with whom you spoke or for whom you left a message. Sometimes the phone logs are lost and you may need to follow up with the office to ensure a response.

- 1. Identify yourself as a constituent.** Clearly state your first and last name, your hometown, and why you are calling. If you know the health legislative assistant (HLA), ask for that staffer by name. If not, ask for the staffer's name and request to be transferred. Sometimes, the receptionist will indicate that you will need to leave your comments with him or her. If that is the case, you still should ask for the name of the HLA so that you have it for future reference.

"My name is Jessie Johnson. I am an oncology nurse from San Francisco, and I would like to speak with the health legislative assistant about a nursing workforce issue."

- 2. Immediately identify the topic you are calling to discuss.**

"I am concerned that Congress is not providing adequate funding for the Nurse Reinvestment Act to address the current and expected nursing shortage. I urge the Senator to support \$210 million in fiscal year 2006 funding for this program to help ensure an adequate and well-trained nursing workforce. Without a sufficient investment today, our nation will not have the supply of nurses necessary to care for the patients of tomorrow."

- 3. Make a few brief points** as to why the issue is of concern to you, your community, and the nation and why the Member should take action. You may want to use written notes to help you stay on topic and remain clear in your argument while articulating your case.

"Our nation already is facing a nursing shortage of unprecedented proportion. The Department of Labor estimates that by the year 2015 the nation will have 1.1 million nursing positions unfilled. With an adequate investment today in the Nurse Reinvestment Act, we will begin to train enough nurses and have sufficient nurse faculty to help address this anticipated workforce shortfall."

- 4. Be clear as to what you are asking the Member to do** (e.g., cosponsor a particular bill, vote for or against a specific measure, sign a “Dear Colleague” letter).

“I urge the Senator to support a fiscal year 2006 allocation of \$210 million for the Nurse Reinvestment Act and to show support by signing the Collins-Mikulski Dear Colleague letter.”

- 5. Be polite in your tone and language.** The staffer on the other end of the phone is overworked, overwhelmed, underpaid, and receives dozens—if not hundreds—of calls a day. In fact, in some offices, you may be speaking with a junior staffer or a college intern, so be sure to be patient and forgiving. Also, do not use any jargon or slang (e.g., acronyms such as NRA when you mean Nurse Reinvestment Act). You should not assume the person on the other end of the phone is familiar with the issue you are discussing, so be as clear and concise as possible.
- 6. Keep it brief.** Limit your call to no more than five minutes unless the staffer asks you questions and seems engaged in the discussion. Offer to send additional or follow-up information to the staffer and request his or her preferred mode of communication (e.g., e-mail, fax).
- 7. Specifically request a written response** from the office on the Member’s position or action on the issue you addressed.

“I would like a letter from your office spelling out the Senator’s views on this issue and what she is doing specifically to address the nursing shortage.”

- 8. Provide your full name, mailing address, e-mail address, and phone number.**

“My name is Jessie Johnson. 123 Main Street, San Francisco, CA 94123. My phone number is 415- 555-1234. I look forward to hearing back from your office.”

- 9. Thank the staffer** for his or her time and indicate that you appreciate his or her willingness to listen and record your comments. Be sure to get the name of the staffer so you can have it for your records, and record the day and time you spoke in case you need to follow up.

“May I have your first and last name for my records? Thank you very much for your time and for recording my views and seeing that I receive a response from the Senator. Good-bye.”

- 10. If you do not receive a response within a reasonable time frame** (i.e., approximately a month), call or write to follow up and request a response. Reference your phone call and mention with whom you spoke and about which topic to help facilitate a meaningful reply.

Other Tips

If you receive the voice mail for a staffer instead of speaking to someone who can record your request and contact information, be sure to leave a brief, clear message for the staffer (noting his or her name for future reference) and provide your full name, contact information, and the nature of your call and specific request (e.g., sign the Collins-Mikulski Dear Colleague letter). Be clear that you would like a return call and/or a letter from the Member on the topic about which you are calling.

"Hello. This is Jessie Johnson from San Francisco. I am an oncology nurse and would like to request that the Senator sign on to the Collins-Mikulski Dear Colleague letter in support of \$210 million for the Nurse Reinvestment Act for fiscal year 2006. I would appreciate knowing the Senator's position on this funding. I can be reached at 123 Main Street, San Francisco, CA 94123. My phone number is 415-555-1234. I look forward to hearing back from your office. Thank you very much for your attention to my request."

Some of the best friends of the cancer community were not always allies, but because of a combination of advocates' tenacity and a history of being respectful, providing reliable information, and making a compelling case, we have won over some terrific champions.

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 nursing and cancer issues. 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.

Also, you can reach your Members of Congress in the following ways.

- E-mail your U.S. Representative through www.house.gov/writerep.
- E-mail your two U.S. Senators through www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm.
- Visit www.onslac.org for alerts on priority issues, model correspondence to send to federal policymakers, and quick links and information about how to contact your Congressional delegation.

For tips about writing to your Members of Congress, visit <http://www.ons.org/lac/pdf/10TipsLetters.pdf>.

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