



Oncology Nursing Society

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TOP TEN TIPS FOR WRITING TO CONGRESS

Writing to 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. Such written communication can be sent to the Congressional office by e-mail, fax, or U.S. Postal Service. If done correctly, written correspondence can result in garnering support for the Oncology Nursing Society's (ONS's) public policy priorities.

When writing to policymakers, be sure to use personal stationery or your personal e-mail account because your employer might not share your views on the topic. For all forms of communication, include your full name, return mailing address, e-mail address, and phone number.

Keep a hard copy of what you send because sometimes faxes, e-mails, or letters are lost and you may need to send a second copy to ensure a response.

- 1. Always be polite.** When addressing correspondence to any government official, be sure to use the proper forms of address (see the end of this document). Even if you are angry, frustrated, or disappointed, use a polite tone and appropriate language. Do not be threatening, confrontational, or rude. The most effective way to communicate with your Members of Congress is the same way you communicate with your colleagues, neighbors, family and friends – clearly, concisely, and with respect and honesty.
- 2. Be clear as to who you are and why you are writing.** In the opening sentence, make your request clear and identify yourself as a registered voter, constituent, and someone who has a tie to nursing and cancer. For example: *“As an oncology nurse who lives, votes, and works in your district, I am writing to request your support for increased funding for the Nurse Reinvestment Act.”* If you know the member or staff aide, say so at the beginning of your message; this may alert the aide reading your correspondence to give your message special attention. If you are in a leadership position and have clearance to write in that capacity (e.g., chapter president, board member), use your title and indicate how many people you are representing from your organization.

ONCOLOGY NURSING SOCIETY TOP TEN TIPS FOR WRITING TO CONGRESS

3. **Be concise and informed.** To the degree possible, try to keep your letter to a single page. You do not need to be an expert on the issue, but you should be familiar with the basic facts and points (i.e., name of the legislation and the associated bill number and why it should be supported or opposed). If you are requesting that the policymaker cosponsors a particular measure or are writing to express disappointment at a particular vote the policymaker cast, check the list of cosponsors and the vote record first at <http://thomas.loc.gov/> to ensure that you have the most up-to-date information and all of your facts straight.
4. **Personalize your message.** Remember, you are an expert in what it is like to deliver health care and treat people with cancer and, as such, you have many experiences to share. Tell your own story or a patient's (being mindful not to use anyone's real name) and explain the relevance to the issue at hand. Although form letters and postcards are "counted," they often do not elicit a response from a Congressional office. Personal stories and illustrations of local impact are remembered more easily by policymakers and their staff than statistics and generic examples. Moreover, personal stories often are what spur policymakers to action, not statistics. The reality is that our policymakers often legislate by anecdote. Your own words are best and can influence the legislator's response or vote. If you are using a template letter (e.g., those provided at www.onslac.org), please take a few moments to personalize it with your own experience. Also, if you can, include relevant state or local information to explain how the issue affects your community.
5. **Be honest and accurate.** If you are including statistics or other scientific information, verify your sources and have them handy if the Congressional office follows up and wants additional information. Also, be sure not to exaggerate the situation or issue you are discussing; do not oversell the policy solution you are advocating or overstate the consequences if the policymaker does not do what you request.
6. **Be modest in your request.** Although you may wish to address multiple issues, do not include everything and the kitchen sink in your communication. It is best to focus on only one or two issues that are of top priority to you. Your communication will be clearer, and policymakers or staffers will be more receptive because you have not overwhelmed them with too many requests.
7. **Be of assistance and serve as a resource.** Policymakers and their staffers are overworked and overwhelmed, so offer your assistance to them; they will appreciate your input and help. If you have an article of interest or relevance, include it with your correspondence or refer to it and indicate that you would be happy to provide it should they be interested.
8. **Express appreciation.** Too many times we just "spank" and forget to "thank." If in response to earlier correspondence you receive a letter informing you that the Member shares your views or took the action you requested, write back expressing your thanks for the response and support. Or, if you learn through the newspaper or the ONS Web site (www.onslac.org), *ONS News*, *ONS Capitol Hill Electronic Advocacy Report (CHEAR)*, or other means that the policymaker recently cosponsored a bill you support or voted the way you hoped, send a letter expressing your pleasure at his or her action. At the close of your correspondence, acknowledge and thank the Member for his or her attention to your concerns.

ONCOLOGY NURSING SOCIETY

TOP TEN TIPS FOR WRITING TO CONGRESS

- 9. Ask for a response.** Because policymakers and their staffers work for you, you have every right to (politely) ask for a response and hold them accountable if your communication goes unanswered. In fact, entire systems, processes, and staff exist in Congressional offices to respond to constituent input. It is important to note, however, that because of the volume of constituent input, it could be weeks or month before you may receive a response. Make clear at the close of your correspondence that you are requesting a written response regarding the policymaker's views on the issue or legislation you addressed.
- 10. Be sure to follow up.** If you do not receive a response in a timely fashion (in excess of a month for most offices, a bit longer for Senators from large states like California and Texas), follow up with the office by phone or with another letter (fax is best) and attach your original (make sure you keep or print a copy for your records before you send it off). Indicate that you have not received a response and are requesting one. If you receive an unsatisfactory response to your correspondence, write or call again to express appreciation for the response and be polite, yet firm, in communicating that the response was not what you anticipated or requested. Reiterate your points and address any concerns or points the policymaker has made on the issue in the correspondence.

Other Tips

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. 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.

Specific Tips About "Snail Mail"

As a result of the fall 2001 anthrax attack, the way in which the U.S. Postal Service mail is handled by Congress has changed. Most of the incoming mail is irradiated to ensure that it is safe for handling by Congressional staff and Members of Congress. This process takes quite a while and often damages the contents. Therefore, for time-sensitive communication, sending written correspondence by e-mail or fax is advised or make a quick phone call (see ONS Tips for Calling Congress at <http://www.ons.org/lac/pdf/10TipsCalls.pdf>). Also, enclosing items such as photographs, original articles, or other documents is not recommended; it is best to save these items for hand delivery or drop them off when you have a meeting in the office.

Specific Tips About E-mail

Each Congressional office maintains a different policy about how e-mail from constituents is handled. Most Members of Congress have a public e-mail address to which e-mail can be sent. To access the e-mail addresses, you either can visit the individual Member's Web page (via www.house.gov or www.senate.gov) or locate them through www.onslac.org. Many Congressional offices provide a generic, automatic acknowledgment that your e-mail has been

ONCOLOGY NURSING SOCIETY

TOP TEN TIPS FOR WRITING TO CONGRESS

received but will follow up with a specific e-mail response to your issue or a letter via regular U.S. Postal Service. A handful of offices still do not respond individually to e-mail but count the input and inform the policymaker how many people have written in on the particular topic. It is best to contact your Members' offices to learn about their individual policies about constituent correspondence.

Proper Forms of Address for Members of Congress

Members of the United States House of Representatives
The Honorable [First Name Last Name of Member of Congress] United States House of Representatives Washington, DC 20515 Dear Representative [Last Name of Member]:

United States Senators
The Honorable [First Name Last Name of Member of Congress] United States Senate Washington, DC 20510 Dear Senator [Last Name of Member]:

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

- By phone through the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121
- By e-mailing your U.S. Representative through www.house.gov/writerep
- By e-mailing your two U.S. Senators through www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm
- By visiting 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.

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