

How To Have Clout on Capitol Hill

*A lot of legislation affects the training field.
Here's how HRD professionals and ordinary
citizens can make their views known and
influence lawmakers.*

BY CYNTHIA PANTAZIS

THE U.S. political environment encompasses an enormous range of issues and is dominated by many varied groups promoting their particular perspectives. However, all citizens can access and influence the political process, if they know how and when to proceed.

This article has information for helping you understand the legislative process so you can communicate effectively with your legislator. This information applies to human resource professionals in particular because one of their main issues, workforce development, is also a leading national issue. On the federal, state, and local levels, leaders from business, education, and labor are constantly debating how to develop a competitive workforce. Such discussions

involve multiple issues to which HRD professionals can respond and offer insight.

The key issues include

- ▶ how to move the hardest-to-serve populations from welfare to work
- ▶ how to create and support a national system of voluntary skill standards
- ▶ how to design systems that will create and support lifelong learning opportunities for all segments of the working population.

To confront those and other national human resource challenges, no group deserves a seat at the table more than the people who represent the field of workplace learning and performance. But the rules of Washington, D.C., aren't always easy to understand. Still, you can achieve

clout by having accurate information, common sense, and conviction. With that in mind, it can be a rewarding endeavor to participate in the political process and contribute to ongoing policy debates and legislative initiatives affecting the HRD profession.

The L word

For better or worse, the term *lobbying* conjures an image of individuals buying power, access, and undue influence. Though no one disputes that such an image represents a certain segment of lobbyists, most lobbying activities are less overt. Many successful campaigns result from citizens back home and their sincere support for, or opposition to, a particular issue. After all, few things are more important to a U.S. congressman or congresswoman than getting reelected. Consequently, members of Congress spend considerable time cultivating the support of people in their districts and states, and promoting the idea that they personally attend to the problems and interests of their constituents. Further, the U.S. system recognizes that every American citizen is a special interest who must be considered when legislating the law of the land. That means that there's ample opportunity for all views to be heard.

There are several ways to inform Congress about the problems, issues, and practical aspects of proposed legislation. The most effective are letters, phone calls, and personal visits to policy makers whose decisions you want to influence. Regardless of the approach you choose, information is key to any advocacy effort—whether on the federal, state, or local level. Sound research and a clear presentation of credible anecdotes and statistics can improve the chance that your legislator will take the action you desire.

Here's how to communicate effectively with your legislator.

Letters. Letters are the most popular choice of communication with a congressional office. Despite the large volume of mail such offices receive, legislators and their staff do read their mail. Keep your letter brief and to the point. Identify the issue you are writing about and refer to specific bills by

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KNOW YOUR FACTS: HOW TO GET INFORMATION

Here are some user-friendly resources for staying informed about U.S. Congressional activity and issues.

▶ the Senate, **www.senate.gov**; the House, **www.house.gov**.

These home pages have extensive information on members, committees, and the legislative process. You can download full text of laws, bills, schedules, and related resources.

▶ THOMAS, **thomas.loc.gov**. This Library of Congress site has the voting records of Congress members and is a good starting point for research concerning the operation of the federal government. It also has full text of current legislation and links to the Senate, the House, congressional commissions, advisory boards, C-SPAN, and other Library of Congress sites.

▶ **www.lib.lsu.edu/gov/fedgov.html**. This site lists government agencies.

▶ Department of Education, **www.ed.gov**; School-to-Work, **www.stw.ed.gov**. These sites have information on education and job training issues.

▶ Educational Resources Information Center, **www.aspensys.com/eric**. This site is a clearinghouse of educational resources.

▶ Department of Labor, **www.dol.gov**

▶ Bureau of Labor Statistics, **www.bls.gov**.

▶ Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, **www.senate.gov/committee/labor.html**, and the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, **www.house.gov/eo**. These sites are useful for tracking legislative issues on employment and training.

▶ *Congressional Directory*. This publication provides biographies of all Congress members, a list of their committee assignments and committee staffs, a cross-index of staff, and congressional district maps. For a copy, contact the Government Printing Office, 710 N. Capitol Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20401; 202.653.5075.

▶ *The Congressional Record*. This publication, published daily during the congressional session, contains the minutes of congressional debates. For a subscription, contact the Government Printing Office or **www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs**.

Trade association and interest group publications can provide information about national issues affecting their professions and industries. For example, ASTD publishes reports and a quarterly newsletter outlining HRD legislative and policy issues.

number. State clearly your reason for writing, and explain what you want your legislator to do. Draw on your own personal experience, describing what effect the legislation will have on you, your community, or your industry. Use constructive arguments, supported by facts.

If you oppose an issue, offer alternatives. If you have additional information, attach it to the letter. Offering expert, supportive material will help your legislator lobby other Congress

members on your view.

Be sure to write a letter of thanks or support when the legislator follows your recommendation. That can foster good will should you write another letter asking for help in the future.

Here are the proper formats for sending correspondence:

▶ The Honorable (full name)
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515
Dear Congressman/Congresswoman (last name):

■ ***Demonstrate the connection between what you're requesting and the interests of the legislator's constituency as a whole*** ■

HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

The idea for legislation can originate from several sources—interest groups, businesses, individuals, and the President. But only members of Congress can introduce a bill. Although Congress can act quickly if necessary, legislation typically works its way slowly through multiple decision points.

After a bill is introduced in either the House of Representatives or Senate, it's assigned a number—House: H.R. _____ or Senate: S. _____. Next, it's referred to a committee and then a subcommittee with jurisdiction over the subject. For example, in the House of Representatives, legislation pertaining to federal employment and training programs is usually referred to the House Education and Workforce Committee and its respective subcommittees. Committee staff often ask for comments on the bill from federal executive departments and the affected federal agencies, such as the Department of Labor for employment and job training issues.

In addition, public hearings are held to solicit comments on the legislation from various affected constituencies. For example, the primary constituents in the area of job training and employment are companies, educators, educational institutions, and labor unions.

After the hearings, the subcommittee will schedule a markup of the bill during which committee members can change provisions, approve the bill, or postpone ac-

tion. If the bill is approved by the subcommittee, it's forwarded to the full committee for consideration. If the bill is approved by the full committee, it may be scheduled for debate and consideration by the entire chamber. Once a bill passes the House or Senate, it's sent to the other chamber for consideration, where the same steps are repeated.

A bill cannot become law unless it is approved by both chambers in identical form. If there are differences between the House and Senate versions, the two chambers appoint conferees, who form a conference committee to resolve the differences between the two versions. When a compromise is reached, the conference committee issues a report that explains the changes. Then, the report is sent to each chamber for consideration.

Once the House and Senate have passed a bill in identical language, it's sent to the President to sign. The President can approve the bill by signing it or disapprove with a veto. If the President vetoes a bill, it's returned to the chamber of origin for a vote. If two-thirds of both chambers vote affirmatively, the veto is overridden and the bill becomes law. Failure of either chamber to override sustains the veto.

At every stage of the process, people can contact members of Congress or staff to provide written and oral comments. The text of all legislation before Congress is available on the Internet.

issues and for relaying constituents' views.

When you call, identify yourself; state the bill number, title, or issue you're calling about; and briefly explain your support or opposition. Ask for a written response that explains the legislator's position. If you're unable to reach your legislator or a staff person directly, send a fax or email outlining your position.

Personal visits. Many elected officials welcome personal visits with their constituents, although it's not always possible. If you want to meet with your legislator, find out when he or she is available in the district or Washington office. It's best to make an appointment as far in advance as possible by phone or letter. State your reason for wanting to meet with the legislator and how long you want to meet. It's easier for staff to arrange a meeting if they know what you intend to discuss and what your relationship is to the area or interests represented by the legislator. Again, don't be surprised or disappointed if you meet with a staff person.

In preparing for your meeting, familiarize yourself with the issue that you're supporting or opposing. Develop clear, succinct points. It's helpful if you have a briefing paper to leave behind. It should include a summary of the issue at hand. Demonstrate the connection between what you're requesting and the interests of the legislator's constituency as a whole. Describe how you or your group can help the legislator in this matter. Follow up your meeting with a letter reiterating your position and thanking the legislator or staff person for his or her time.

It's a myth that successful lobbying implies influence; the most effective professional lobbyists trade facts and expertise. What citizen lobbyists may lack in experience and contacts, they can make up for in knowledge and research. The most effective lobbying approach is the least overt—the simple presentation of accurate information by ordinary citizens. ■

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► The Honorable (full name)
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510
Dear Senator (last name):
Phone calls. When time is short and you need fast action, a phone call is probably the best way to make your views known to your legislator. Be-

fore you call, write down the key points you will want to make. Don't be disappointed if you can't talk directly to your legislator. Congressional staff are important players in the legislative process. As the gateways to members of Congress, they're responsible for briefing members on