Effective Testimony Guide for Municipal Officials

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Affecting public policy is a vital endeavor and is only successful when citizens – and especially local officials – are involved. Your participation is always a crucial component of VLCT's year-round advocacy for municipal interests. On this page you'll find guidelines and additional information to improve your ability to make legislators understand your municipality's issues and priorities.

Best Practices for Effective Testimony

1. **If you do not already know your legislators, introduce yourself, ideally before the session gets underway**. Invite them to one of your selectboard meetings or any community gathering to develop personal relationships.
2. **Start early.** Contacting your legislators to urge them to consider the municipal point of view doesn't do any good if the votes have already been cast. Every bill goes through a committee process, so contacting the right person at the right time is crucial. You can reach out to local lawmakers and committee chairs before the session even starts!
3. **Coordinate!** Be in touch with VLCT's advocacy team before testifying so we can support you and keep you informed before and after you speak with lawmakers.
4. **Be prepared**. Make sure that before you talk to your legislator or testify in committee, you know the details of the issue, the current proposed legislation, and at least some of the opposing arguments. Bill drafts and prior witness testimony are posted on the committee page.
5. **All politics are local**. Connect the issue you care about to statewide impacts and show legislators the effects of a bill or proposal. Be as specific and as factual as possible when stating your town's opinion on the legislation. Use stories and data to support your point.

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6. **Anticipate questions and criticisms about your position and the potential cost of it**. Emphasize that if the directive is not funded at the state level, it will require increased property taxes.
7. **Understand that you need a majority of House and Senate votes to pass a measure.** The more support you can garner from disparate legislative entities, the better your chance of success. Talk with caucus leaders, legislators of neighboring communities, allied interest groups, and committee members from both chambers who cover your issue area.
8. **Provide both written and spoken testimony**. Verbal testimony is a great way to show your expertise, build a narrative, and answer questions. In your written testimony you can add supporting data, verifying research, and even suggested amendments. Email your written testimony to the full committee in advance and bring ample paper copies in person. Ask the committee assistant to post your testimony online for future reference.
9. **Follow Up**. Send an email thanking the chair for the opportunity to speak. If you ask a legislator to take specific action, let them know what that action should be and follow up in time for key legislative milestones including before the committee and chamber votes.
10. **Use the Media**. Legislators read their local newspapers, listen to the radio, watch television, and follow issues online. Write an opinion piece or a letter to the editor in response to recent coverage. Seek an interview opportunity with local press – make sure journalists have the facts from you.

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I testify in person, or is remote okay?

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While the legislature is meeting in a hybrid manner, testifying is easier than ever. If you request or are asked to testify on a bill, you will have the opportunity to do so via Zoom. Other than being able to testify remotely, there are no changes to how committee meetings are conducted since 2020. **That said**, if you are able to take a day to visit Montpelier, VLCT's advocacy team can help you make the most of your time. In addition to testifying in committee, you can meet with your local legislative delegation and other allies who work in the State House every day, including non-profits, business chambers, state agency staff, caucus chairs, legislative leaders, members of the media, and more, to advocate for the issues most important for your community.

Is there a dress code in the State House?

A professional appearance is important, even online. That said, the State House is the people's house! You will not feel overdressed in formal professional attire (like a suit), and the clothing you typically wear to work is okay when you are testifying during your regular workday. If you are a member of a public sector union and/or speaking on behalf of the union, feel free to wear clothing that indicates your affiliation. If you are a municipal firefighter or police officer, wearing dress uniforms is totally appropriate. Feel comfortable dressing in any religious or cultural clothing that you typically wear.

I wasn't able to get on the committee schedule to testify. Is it too late?

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No way! It's not over until it's over: bills can change many times throughout the lawmaking process, right up until the governor uses their pen. Try calling, emailing, or meeting with lawmakers who represent your community or who serve on the committee of jurisdiction. You can also raise your concerns with the staff of the Senate President Pro Tempore and the Speaker of the House. You can contact your legislators when they are home on the weekends or during the Town Meeting break to set up an in-person meeting. If you send an email, follow up with a phone call to remind the legislator of your message.

I speak to my selectboard/council all the time, but I've never sat before a legislative committee. Are there special rules?

The House and Senate do have unique rules adopted by each chamber at the beginning of the biennium, but don't worry too much about those.

While you are giving testimony, you can address legislators as "Representative Smith" or "Senator Jones", or just "Representative" or "Senator".

Clearly state your name and affiliation for the record and address your comments to the chairperson as "Madame Chair" or "Mr. Chair" just like you would to the moderator during town meeting and regardless of who the question maker is. The chair runs the meeting and is in charge in the committee "room."

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Remember that committee hearings are public meetings and you are on the record, even in the Zoom chat.

Pro tip: cell phones, laptops, food, and drink are ALL banned from the Senate Floor. The House is a little more relaxed, which means there are often reporters and lobbyists scattered around the balcony!

This is helpful, but I'm still pretty freaked out!

That's okay! You may not deal with lawmakers every day, but we do, and we can help you. Email Josh Hanford(opens in a new tab) or Samantha Sheehan (opens in a new tab), or call either of us through 1-800-649-7915, if you have any more questions or concerns. We can help prepare you for effective testimony and stronger advocacy.

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