

Testifying at a Legislative Hearing

Call the committee staff and ask when the hearing is and for permission to testify at the hearing. You need to ask to be scheduled to present testimony and for a commitment from them that you will be placed on the agenda.

Doing Your Homework

Testimony before a legislative hearing is more complicated than showing up and voicing your opinion. Your goal is purposeful communication that will have an impact. For that to happen, you need to:

- **Know the legislation**-You need to understand what the legislation would do, what laws it would replace, and it's important to tailor what you're saying to what the legislators are considering; testimony on a specific bill before a specific committee is not a soapbox to talk about other concerns.
- **Know the legislative process**-You need to understand where the bill is in the legislative process, to know who's supporting it and who's opposing it, and what are the chances of success. These factors will influence how you craft your testimony.
- **Know your audience**-In a given legislative committee, it's important to understand who may be supportive of your position, who will definitely oppose it, and most important, which legislators are receptive if not supportive.

Preparing a Written Statement

Reasons for providing a committee with a written statement in addition to oral testimony include:

- It communicates to the legislators more than a casual passing interest in the legislation.
- In preparing a written statement, the organization has to come to complete agreement on its stand on the issue.
- It ensures that the committee record of the testimony will be accurate.
- It allows for flexibility in that the person testifying can highlight one part of the written testimony in the oral remarks to respond to what others have said at the hearing.
- It provides greater assurance that media coverage of the testimony will be fuller and more accurate because media representatives can work from the written statement rather than hastily penciled notes. Getting to the hearing room early and passing out copies to the media representatives attending the hearing gives them a chance to read it before the hearing starts, reinforcing the impact of later testimony.

These guidelines may be useful in preparing a written statement:

- Write the statement so that it stands on its own and doesn't need the oral testimony to be understood.
- Written statements are often between 1500 words and 2500 words. Anything longer (and any technical materials and lots of statistics) should go in an appendix or appendices.
- Use shorter words rather than longer words
- Focus the testimony on the proposed legislation.
- Avoid hostility in any form.

Delivering Oral Testimony

You'll want to start with brief introductory remarks—a self introduction, a description of the organization that you represent, and an expression of appreciation for being allowed to testify.

If you are testifying in opposition to a bill, you can use the “sandwich” method. With this, you start with a positive, end with a positive, and in the middle is the criticism of the proposal. One example of this could be to start with “I applaud the legislature’s commitment to examining this issue. There is near-total agreement that what we are doing now is not the best approach. However,…” Then you explain, with stories and data, the flaws in the proposal. You would then conclude with a thank-you to the committee for allowing you to speak.

If you are testifying in favor of a piece of legislation, you want to make a limited number of points. The old rule for preachers on Sunday morning was “no more than three point to the sermon,” and the same can apply to spoken testimony. Use your personal experience, data, and others’ stories to make a limited number of points and to make them well. Remember than it’s not what you say, but what the legislators and media representatives come away with, that counts.

After your testimony, it’s a nice touch to send letters of appreciation to the legislators and committee staff.

References

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Pierce, Dean. *Policy for the Social Work Practitioner*. New York: Longman, 1984.

Sharwell, George. "How to Testify Before a Legislative Committee," *Practical Politics: Social Work and Political Responsibility*, Maryann Mahaffey and John Hanks, ed. District of Columbia: National Association of Social Workers, 1982.