Best Practices in Counselor Advocacy: Writing Letters and E-mails That Get Results

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Contents

• Rationale: Why write letters?
• Best Practices in Advocacy Letter Writing
  ◦ Overview, addressing legislators, telling your story, being concrete, being informative, being timely, calls-to-action and checklists
  ◦ When to write, who to write, how to write… and much more!
Rationale: Why Take the Time to Write

- Often the best way to get results is to write a letter that will be mailed
  - Letters provide a written record
  - Letters can be shared between multiple staff members
  - Letters communicate serious intent
  - Personal or organizational letterhead conveys professionalism
Best Practices in Advocacy
Letter Writing: Overview

• Write approximately a one single-spaced page letter or a two page double spaced letter.
• Use personal or business stationery.
• Include your name, return address, and telephone number including the area code on the letter. This helps to identify you as a constituent.
• Hand write letters if they are exceptionally legible; otherwise, type.
Addressing the Letter

• Name the bill's sponsoring Member(s).
  ◦ Visit your state legislative page to find the bill’s sponsoring member(s)
    http://www.ncsl.org/?tabid=17173
  ◦ For bills introduced into Congress visit
    http://thomas.loc.gov/home/bills_res.html

• Spell the legislator’s name correctly.

• Use appropriate title (Representative, Senator).
  Elected officials are addressed as "Honorable."
Finding Legislator(s)

- **US House**

- **US Senate**
  - [http://www.senate.gov/](http://www.senate.gov/)

- **State Legislators**
  - [http://www.votesmart.org/](http://www.votesmart.org/)
Best Practices: Addressing Legislators

• Double check the legislator’s address.
• Cover only one subject per letter. Send a separate letter for each concern as different assistants in the office may work with different issues.
• Clearly identify bills to avoid confusion. At the top write, “Re: (name and number of bill).”
• If you know the legislator or staff aide personally, mention it at the start of your letter.
Best Practices: Telling Your Story

• State that you are an individual who is a constituent to the legislator. Say why you are writing and list your credentials.

• Tell your story about how this legislation touches your professional life or your clients’ lives in your own words. Stories make a tremendous impact on legislators, but be careful to maintain client confidentiality! Seek supervision.

• A thoughtful and well-constructed story can have more impact than a thousand letters or calls.
Best Practices: Being Concrete

• Use *concrete examples* about how the topic affects you and others.
• Few take the time to craft thoughtful, personal letters that demonstrate how the legislation impacts the individual on a daily basis.
• Personal stories will almost guarantee that you will capture their interest and attention.
• Sends a signal that you really care about the issue.
Best Practices: Being Informatiive, Being Timely

• Avoid jargon and acronyms in your writing. For example, CSI can stand for many organizations.
• Remember that your letter will be read by someone of intelligence, but that person is less informed than you about the aspects of this particular issue.
• Make your letters timely: Legislators appreciate having your views and information while the issue is before them.
Best Practices: Calls-to-Action and Checklists

• Ask the legislator to do something specific. “Please vote for/against [number of the bill]” or “I recommend the following changes to…”

• Indicate why it is important to you that they take action regarding your problem or request.

• Indicate your thanks and restate your most important message.

• Run spell/grammar check before sending the letter.
Avoid When Advocacy Letter Writing

• Demanding the legislator’s cooperation.
• Sending any kind of a form letter.
• Threatening defeat at the next election.
• Adopting a politically partisan tone in your letter.
• Chronic letter writing. Choose issues wisely.
• Using the legislator’s first name unless you know them personally.
• Getting discouraged!
Write Only Your Legislator(s)

• What can I do when an issue of importance rests in the hands of an elected official who doesn’t represent me?

• Ask your own elected official(s) to advocate for your position with their contemporaries by writing a letter, having a meeting, or making a phone call on your behalf.

• Working with your own elected official is a more effective use of your time than mailing or calling someone else’s legislator. Only your legislator can and will work with you.
4 Letter Writing Stances: Choose Only One!

• Before writing your letter, know your position to the issue. You could be writing as a…
  ◦ Constituent - A voter telling your legislator your views on an issue. No direct connection/impact to the issue. Simply have an opinion.
  ◦ Stakeholder – Someone directly affected by a policy decision. (Counselor or client who is impacted by the outcome of a bill.)
4 Letter Writing Stances

• Or you could be writing as a…
  ◦ Expert - Someone who has particular/specialized knowledge about the issue under debate. (Have published/researched in a specific area.)
  ◦ Representative - Writing not your personal views, but stating the collective views of the group you represent.
    • For example, the CSI President writing legislators on behalf of CSI members.
Putting it all together…

• **Introduce Yourself**
  ◦ State that you are a constituent
  ◦ State that you are a licensed professional who is directly impacted by this legislation.
  ◦ Convince the legislator of your experience and expertise in this area.

• **Call to Action:** Ask them to take a specific action! Support legislation, make a public statement, change aspects of a bill, etc.
How to begin...

• Be Specific: *Personal experiences are effective and often moving.* Share your story, but be mindful of the client’s confidentiality!!!

• Be Polite: No one appreciates being spoken down to or insulted. You are trying to garner their support, so be nice.

• Clearly State Your Request: Plainly tell your legislator that you want them to support (or oppose) a certain bill.
The opposition...

• Legislator likely to hear from the opposing view.
• Don’t disparage opponents. Refrain from labeling those who disagree as “stupid.”
• Fairly presenting the other view and explaining why you have the better solution builds trust.
• If honest about the opposing view up front, the more likely they will believe you in the long run.
• Implies that you have nothing to fear from the legislator knowing the other side of the story.
Connect the Letter to the Legislator

• Help them to understand how the issues you care about connect to real people in their district.
• Capture their attention by learning what issues they care most about and tying their interests to your issue.
  • If they care about health care, how does your issue connect to health care concerns?
  • Read their biography on their website to find their interests
3 parts to a great letter…1 & 2

1. Tell them what you’re going to tell them.
   ◦ Introduce yourself, describe your credentials.
   ◦ Explain your support for or against a bill.

2. Tell them.
   ◦ Discuss the issue and explain your stand.
   ◦ Be specific and describe how this impacts you and your clients. Relate your message to your personal experiences and their interests.
3 parts to a great letter… 3

- **Tell them what you told them**
  - Request (not demand) a specific action.
  - Thank the legislator for considering your views.
  - Offer assistance if the legislator has questions.
  - Ask questions such as, “Can I count on you to vote yes on HB 53?” This requires a response back to you.
Using CSI Chapter Letterhead for Your Letter

• **Remember that:**
  - CSI is the sole official acronym of *Chi Sigma Iota, International*.
    - Be sure your letterhead clearly states your chapter name so no one can confuse the chapter with Chi Sigma Iota, International
    - The Chapter Faculty Advisor must approve all advocacy letters that are sent using CSI letterhead.
    - It is good practice to copy CSI International on advocacy letters.
What about e-mail?

- *Most (but not all)* legislative offices pay attention to e-mails
- Check with the legislator’s office first to confirm that their use of e-mails equals that of letters sent through the mail
- Follow the same “rules” of content and relevance discussed for best practices in advocacy letter writing mentioned earlier
Follow-up 2-3 weeks after your initial request!

- This is 2-way communication. You must follow-up!
- Write back to their letter with another brief letter.
  - If they agreed, send a letter of thanks.
  - If they disagreed, reply with a brief letter quoting the section(s) of their letter with which you take issue, restate your position, and supply additional evidence to support your view.
Follow-up 2-3 weeks after your initial request!

• Some legislators ignore initial requests. Asking a second time lets them know that are serious.

• Send a thank you note when they do something that you like!
Example State Legislative Letter

The Honorable Richard Nero  
Ohio House of Representatives  
77 South High Street, District 42  
Columbus, Ohio 43215

RE: Ohio Senate Bill 53 – Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor’s Ability to Sign Ohio’s Mental Health Hold

November 21, 2008

Dear Representative Nero,

I urge you to support Ohio SB 53 sponsored by Senator Clancy, which allows Licensed Professional Clinical Counselors (LPCCs) the ability to sign the State’s mental health hold. As a constituent who is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) in the State of Ohio and a doctoral student in Counseling & Human Development Services at Kent State University who will soon educate future counselors, I thought I should bring the positive effects of this bill to your attention.
Example State Legislative Letter

If passed, Ohio SB 53 will allow LPCCs (who already have the ability to diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders in the State of Ohio) to appropriately treat clients exhibiting severe suicidality/homicidality. Ohio SB 53 grants LPCCs in this situation the ability to sign the State’s mental health hold so that the client can be transported to the hospital where an examination can be conducted by a psychiatrist/physician to make a determination as to whether or not the client should be admitted. Right now the clients of counselors in the State of Ohio are at risk daily of being lost in the system without Ohio SB 53 being enacted. Because counselors are forbidden to sign the State mental health hold, our clients are at the mercy of strangers to understand the severity of the situation when we have already developed a relationship with the client and understand the risks involved.

A recent client of mine was homicidal and afraid to return to her apartment building for fear she would kill a next door neighbor. The client sought emergency services from the clinic where I was working and I was assigned as her counselor. After spending 1.5 hours with the client, I assessed that she would indeed violently harm and possibly kill if the other individual was even spat on. I sought out my supervisor who concurred with this determination. As my supervisor was not able to sign the State mental health hold, we were forced to call the police. When the officer arrived, he asked the client if she would LIKE to be taken to the hospital even after my attempts to get the officer to understand that transport was a necessity and not an option. Luckily, the client wanted services and agreed to go. What might have been the outcome if she had refused because the officer allowed her to leave and then she had harmed the other person?
Example State Legislative Letter

The State of Ohio has given counselors the ability to diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders, but not to follow through on our professional code of ethics not to mention State licensing obligations. Physicians and psychologists have come out in opposition to Ohio SB 53 stating that if counselors are granted the ability to sign the State mental health hold, it will unduly burden the system. Counselors are already groveling every day to physicians, psychologists, and police officers who can sign the mental health hold to provide constituents in your district the best mental health care possible. In my opinion, the opposition to Ohio SB 53 seems more like a professional turf battle. I am more interested in the care of my clients and the safety of our district over a turf battle. I believe your passion for health care places you in a position to truly understand the negative implications of Ohio SB 53 failing in the Ohio House of Representatives.

I urge you to support Ohio SB 53. Can I count on your vote? I look forward to hearing your answer. I thank you for taking the time to consider my opinion on this matter. I hope that my expressed concern will make a difference in your decision. If you need additional information, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Stephanie T. Burns, LPC, NCC
123 Main Street
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio 44221
330-923-5555 sburns1@XXXX.com
The Honorable Steven C. LaTourette  
2371 Rayburn House Office Building  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515  

RE: Public Law 109-461 (Veterans Benefits, Healthcare, and Information Technology Act)  

November 21, 2008  

Dear Representative LaTourette,  

I am writing to request action to include professional counselors in the delivery of mental health services per the Veterans Benefits, Healthcare, and Information Technology Act, now Public Law 109-461, which was sponsored by Senator Larry E. Craig. Unfortunately, the Veterans Administration (VA) has been slow in creating policies to permit licensed professional counselors the ability to apply for and be hired into mental health counseling jobs. As a constituent who is a Licensed Professional Counselor (PC) in the State of Ohio and a doctoral student in Counseling & Human Development Services at Kent State University who will soon educate future counselors, I thought I should bring the positive effects of fully enacting this Public Law, which was signed by the President on December 22, 2006, to your attention.
Example House of Representatives Letter

An Associated Press story earlier in 2008 referenced a “watchdog” organization estimate that as many as 20 percent of those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and many are attempting to adjust to continued military service and return to civilian life with insufficient mental health counseling and related services. A number of the issues associated with troop suicide were the subject of an in-depth story on PBS's News Hour on November 9th. The mental health needs of our veterans demand that they be provided the best possible care. There are over 6,000 licensed professional counselors in the State of Ohio with extensive practicum and internship experiences, which prepare them to provide quality mental health services to our veterans. Right now our brave veterans are facing an overwhelming mental health crisis, yet an entire group of qualified and dedicated professionals are being excluded from rendering much-needed care without Public Law 109-461 fully being enacted.

Licensed professional counselors in the State of Ohio apply of mental health, psychological, and human development principles, through cognitive, affective, behavioral or systematic intervention strategies, that address wellness, personal growth, or career development, as well as pathology. I ask you to please support our veterans by demanding that the VA immediately give licensed counselors full and equal access to all mental health counseling positions at all VA facilities. This step will help to ensure that our veterans have the opportunity to receive mental health care from highly qualified professionals with excellent skills in crisis intervention, personal and social counseling, couple and family counseling and group counseling.
Example House of Representatives Letter

As a licensed professional counselor in the State of Ohio with a specialization in the treatment of chronic pain, I am saddened on a daily basis that I cannot provide assistance to our men and women in service who often present with this problem. Additionally, I have a long history of family and friends serving in the military and I am angered by the lack of mental health services at their disposal. Further, as a future counselor educator, I am already well aware of many students frustrated by their inability to counsel the population they have such a passion to serve upon graduation.

I am well aware of and truly respect your work to protect our service men and women over your seven terms in office. I believe you are in a truly unique position to appreciate what is at stake here for our nation’s heroes and heroines. I urge you to fully enact the Veterans Benefits, Healthcare, and Information Technology Act, now Public Law 109-461. Can I count on your support? I look forward to hearing your answer. I thank you for taking the time to consider my opinion on this matter. I hope that my expressed concern will make a difference in your decision. If you need additional information, please contact me.

Sincerely,
Stephanie T. Burns, LPC, NCC
123 Main Street
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio 44221
330-555-5555 sburns1@something.com
Federal Counseling Legislation Information

• On the ACA website
  ◦ [http://www.counseling.org/PublicPolicy/](http://www.counseling.org/PublicPolicy/)
    • General information about federal counseling legislation
    • Sign up for Government Relations Listserv
    • Call to action on current federal legislation
References: Selected Web Sites

- [http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/uscongress/a/letterscongress.htm](http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/uscongress/a/letterscongress.htm)
- [http://www.cra.org/govaffairs/advocacy/writecong.html](http://www.cra.org/govaffairs/advocacy/writecong.html)
- [http://fcnl.org/resources/toolkit/write_congress/](http://fcnl.org/resources/toolkit/write_congress/)