



# LEGISLATIVE TOOLBOX

## Tips for Effectively Testifying in Committee

**D**ozens of government relations professionals are at work in the State Capitol and the State Office Building every day during the legislative session. And dozens of times per day, those professionals testify before House and Senate committees, offering their clients' position on issues being debated in the halls of power.

But just as often, Senators and House members, and their staffs, like to call upon those from outside the Capitol complex to get opinions on bills being considered. The testimony of a so-called "regular Minnesotan" is viewed as very valuable, and presents an opportunity to influence policy that's under consideration.

It can be an intimidating moment when you first sit down at the table before a bipartisan group of legislators to give your take on a bill under consideration, but it doesn't need to be so. Here are a few tips to consider when you would like to offer testimony on a bill, or when you are asked to testify.

### Sign Up

Each committee is chaired by a member of the legislature, but the real person running the show is the committee administrator. Check in with that person (they will be listed on the committee's website) by phone or email prior to the committee meeting to let them know you want to testify on a particular bill. They will usually give you information about where the bill will be on the committee's agenda for the day, and roughly how much time you may have (for controversial bills, it's not uncommon for there to be a limit on how much time is allotted for public testimony). You will also be asked to sign in on a sheet during the committee meeting, so they have a record of who testified.

### Come Prepared

Look professional, bring business cards, and have a page or two of key points that you would like to get across. When

you speak to the committee, avoid reading off a script — but stick to your main points, be friendly, and make eye contact with the legislators.

### Go Through the Chair

The holder of the gavel (usually the committee chair) controls the conversation inside the room. Come promptly to the table when you are called upon, thank the members, identify yourself (state your name, title and where you live — you may be asked to spell your name for the audio recording of the meeting). Begin your comments with "Mr. Chair (or Madam Chair) and members..." If you are asked a question by a legislator, wait for the committee chair's permission to respond prior to answering. So a typical exchange goes like this:

Senator Martin (to testifier): "Mr. Jones, would this legislation hurt your business?"

Mr. Jones: "Mr. chair."

Committee chair: "Mr. Jones."

Mr. Jones: "Senator Martin, yes, this legislation would have a negative impact..."

It is a good idea to watch the testifiers ahead of you to see how they interact with the chair and other members, or watch video of a committee meeting for examples of how it is done properly. Video of previous committee meetings is archived here: <http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/comm/commemlist.asp>

### Respect Their Time

Any message that you can deliver in five minutes is likely to be well received. Three minutes would be even better.

### Don't Debate

A legislator may ask pointed questions. This is not a place for you to debate them. It's appropriate to say something along the lines of, "Clearly, we see this differently..."

### **Don't Bluff**

If you're asked a question you cannot answer, it is perfectly acceptable to admit you do not have the information they need, but offer to get it for them. Do not try to bluff your way through an answer if you do not have the needed information. And remember to follow up.

### **Leave-Behinds Are OK**

If you have a one-page flier summarizing your position and the key points in your testimony, it's fine to bring copies for all members of the committee (the committee administrator can tell you in advance how many copies to bring, and a page will pass them out to members and staff). One or two handouts, and your business card, are fine to leave behind. Do not overwhelm them with paper.

### **Thank Them for Their Time**

End on a friendly note, thank the chair and the committee for their time, and encourage members to contact you as needed for additional information. If members have asked for follow-up information, make sure you provide it to them within a reasonable amount of time. Also, a follow-up thank-you email to the chair and the committee administrator can be helpful.