

**YOUR ADVOCACY TOOLKIT**

# **HOW TO TESTIFY AT A PUBLIC HEARING WITH DIGNITY**

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**Testifying at a public hearing is one of the most effective ways to engage with an important legislative action in your state. Submitting testimony is a path to engaging lawmakers who depend on your input for policy decision making.**

*“Legislation is decided by those who show up.”*

—Unknown

Without a public voice, laws that we need may never get passed. Showing up in numbers and speaking out on issues to influence the political path is an effective way to influence change. Lawmakers want input from the public to guide their decision-making. The more people appear at hearings to testify, the more lawmakers pay attention. Think of it this way:

*“We, as committee members, rely on the voices of the people through testifying at public hearings and/or submitted written statements to understand both sides of the issues presented in a bill before us. Your opinions matter and are extremely important.”*

—Wendy Chase (D),  
New Hampshire  
State Representative,  
District 18

*What would you think if you threw a party and no one showed up for it?*

When lawmakers do not hear from people—or worse, when they only hear from one side of an issue—it’s quite natural to assume there is no interest. That makes passing a bill even more difficult.

## **BEFORE A PUBLIC LEGISLATIVE HEARING**

Speaking at a hearing makes a significant impact that day and is a powerful way to personally connect with committee members. There’s a lot you can do to prepare for submitting your testimony.

Indeed, once you’ve testified, it will seem like a lot of time and energy has gone into the two or three-minute interval reserved for your oral testimony. But the better you prepare, the more effective your testimony will be.

- Attend any public hearing of the committee that will be hearing the death with dignity bill (likely judiciary or health) or watch a video recording of such a hearing on your state legislature's website to observe the hearing process. It can help your comfort level when it's time for your bill.
- Sign up to receive notices about your bill or updates from the committee hearing the bill; most legislatures have a bill notification feature on their website. Alternatively, sign up for our updates. We send out action alerts before every legislative hearing.
- Read the bill. All too often people give testimony on provisions not in the bill. Nothing causes loss of credibility faster than inaccurate testimony.
- Learn your legislature's guidelines for submitting public testimony. Rules to watch out for include the process for oral testimony (especially the time limits) and submitting paper copies of your testimony.
- Verify hearing details, including date, time, location, and hearing rules (or changes in rules specific to your committee) for testifying.
- Contact the committee clerk to request any special accommodations.
- Draft your testimony.
- Submit your written testimony in advance, according to the rules of

your legislature.

- Then, work on your verbal presentation.

Verify with your state legislature to learn the guidelines for attending a hearing and submitting public testimony. [[search here for your state legislature website](#)]

Be sure to follow all guidelines and requirements for your state, or your testimony may not be accepted. Your testimony will become a part of the public record and will be available to the committee in their working session.

### **PREPARING TO TESTIFY**

Plan to submit verbal and written testimony. Written submissions can be as long as needed. There may be a limit on speaking if lawmakers expect a crowded hearing, so you'll want to prepare a summary version of your written testimony. You should be able to say what you need to say in about two to three minutes.

- Keep your testimony simple and straightforward. Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Stick with what you know; personal stories are best if you have one.
- Outside of your personal story, confine remarks to irrefutable facts and/or your area of expertise only.
- Attend and testify at the hearing for your bill if you can, and minimally submit written testimony. People who

oppose your view certainly will. There is strength and political persuasion in numbers. Being in the committee room matters.

- If possible, submit your written testimony ahead of time, according to the rules of your legislature. Then, work on your verbal presentation.
- Some online resources recommend you not read from a paper while speaking to a committee. That is not easy to do unless you are an experienced speaker. Know that it is fine to read from a paper when giving testimony and committees are accustomed to people doing that. If your written testimony is lengthy, create a summary version you can read within two to three minutes.
- Have a friend snap a photo of you while you are testifying and post to social media.

## CRAFTING YOUR TESTIMONY

*“Keep it simple. Keep it short. Keep it focused.”*

—Mary Krinkie, VP of Government Relations, MN Hospital Association, from *Tips on Testifying Before a Legislative Committee*, Minnesota Senate Media

**1. Introduction:** Greet committee chair by title and name. State your name, where you live, and your organization/expertise (if applicable for the hearing):

*“Good morning, Senator/ Representative [NAME] and members of the [NAME] Committee. My name is [NAME], I live in [TOWN], and (if*

*applicable) I am [YOUR TITLE AND ORGANIZATION]”*

**2. Clearly present your position:** “I support” or “I oppose” followed by bill number and title.

**3. Say why you have taken your position:**

Share your personal story clearly and honestly. This is often the most powerful and persuasive aspect of public hearings.

### Why?

Stories ground policy in real life. Talking about real people humanizes the issue.

It is easier for people to grasp concepts and retain information about provisions in a bill tied to real experiences.

With a story, the issue is not about candidates or parties, the issue is about someone—like the person you are engaging—who will be helped by the bill.

Stories can open doors and connect people to common ground.

Include factual arguments and/or data as evidence to support your position, but only if you are well versed in the information. The committee may ask questions and you should be comfortable and confident that you can respond or offer to get back with an answer.

#### **4. Ask for specific action:**

*"I urge you to vote in favor of..." or "against" [bill number again]*

**5. Thank the committee** for the opportunity to speak and offer to answer questions they may have.

#### **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE**

For your brief speaking testimony, print with a large enough font that you can comfortably see and read or refer to it while standing at a table or podium (14-16 pt).

Practice verbal testimony until you feel comfortable and able to keep it under the time limit (two to three minutes). If certain words or phrases cause you to stumble, rework them until it flows better. If you tend to speak rapidly, practice slowing your pace to ensure the committee catches everything you say.

#### **THE DAY OF THE HEARING**

Attending the hearing can be exciting for some and nerve-wracking for others. It may be more fun if you travel together with others in the same vehicle (not to mention easier to find parking). These tips will help you navigate the day.

- Remember to observe all legislative guidelines and procedures.
- Dress as you might for a job interview.
- Have something to eat/drink ahead of time. Most municipal buildings will not allow food or beverages in hearing rooms.

- Verify location, start time, driving directions, and any parking instructions.
- Arrive early to get a seat. Legibly print your name on the speaker registration sheet.
- Many bills may be heard that day and often are not presented in the order they appear on legislative calendars. Be patient and remain close by for when your name is called or join the line of people waiting for their turn to speak on your bill.
- Be flexible, polite, and respectful.
- Speak directly into the microphone (it should be about 6 inches from your chin).
- Avoid repeating points made by other speakers. If all the points you wanted to make have been made, tell the committee you agree with the testimony given by the preceding speakers and urge them to take the appropriate action.
- Address your remarks only to the committee or task force.
- If the committee asks questions, answer only those questions that you can answer truthfully and factually. It's okay to say, "I don't know, but I will get back to you."
- Be sure you follow up promptly if you've promised follow-up information.



Maine volunteers gathered to write thank-you notes after floor votes on LD 347, 2016. Used with permission.

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### **AFTER THE HEARING**

Follow up with committee members after a hearing. The most effective way to do that is by phone or by a hand-written thank-you note.

A simple *thank you* can be memorable to lawmakers who hear often from dissatisfied people. If you know a group of supporters or are connected to a local grassroots organization, consider gathering for a note-writing party. It is a fun way to follow up.

Whether calling or writing, following up is an important part of engaging with your legislature. Your communications should be simple, direct, and should acknowledge the time and effort lawmakers (even the ones you disagree with) put into serving the public.

#### **Thank-you note example:**

“Dear [title and name]:

I attended the public hearing for [bill number and title] on [date] and submitted testimony to the

committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share my story [ex: about my husband, Jack] in support of [bill title and number]. It means everything to know you will fairly consider my input on this important issue. [Add a sentence about why you want the law to pass or ask the committee to vote a certain way].

Sincerely, [name, address, phone number, email address]”

### **OVERCOMING FEAR OF PUBLIC SPEAKING**

Fear of speaking in front of others is the most common reason people give for not wanting to testify, yet every voice is necessary. Don't underestimate the power of your personal story. If you are worried about speaking at a hearing, keep in mind:

- Committee members are accustomed to hearing from nervous speakers and speakers with emotional personal stories and you'll find them supportive of you.
- A public hearing is the most important part of the legislative process and (generally speaking) the only place a voting citizen has an opportunity to contribute to the law-making process in their state.
- If you are very nervous and/or distraught and are certain you cannot get through verbal testimony, you can have a friend or other supportive person read your testimony for you while you stand with them.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Read

[\*Giving Effective Legislative Testimony\*](#)

[pp. 9-11], American Academy of Family Physicians

[\*Using Personal Testimony\*](#), Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas

[\*Testify at a Public Hearing\*](#), National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship

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### Watch

[\*Making a Difference: A Citizen's Guide on\*](#)

[\*How to Testify\*](#), Legislative Media in the Oregon State Capitol

[\*How to overcome the fear of public speaking\*](#), Harvard Extension School

[\*Tips on Testifying Before a Legislative Committee\*](#), Minnesota Senate Media Services

### Testimony Examples

**Personal:** [\*Mary Bayer, RN, Augusta, ME, public record\*](#)

**Professional:** [\*Testimony in support of LD 1313\*](#), before the Joint Committee on Health and Human Services, Augusta, ME, on behalf of the Death with Dignity National Center, by Death with Dignity National Center's Executive Director, Peg Sandeen, PhD, MSW

**Professional:** [\*Testimony in Support of SB 261\*](#), before the Nevada State Assembly Committee on Health and Human Services, May 29, 2017, by Death with Dignity National Center's National Strategist and Policy Analyst Geoff Sugerman