



# Advocate's Guide to Visiting the Iowa Capitol



To learn more about advocacy at the state capitol, contact **Sheila Hansen** at [shansen@commongoodiowa.org](mailto:shansen@commongoodiowa.org) or visit [www.commongoodiowa.org](http://www.commongoodiowa.org).

# Thank you so much for coming to Des Moines to meet with your legislators!

You are about to participate in one of the most important and effective strategies to influence the legislative process and help ensure future public support for programs and services for young children.

Furthermore, you can take pride in knowing that your visit to your legislative delegation contributes to our great democratic process and sets an example for others to follow.

The purpose of your visit is to educate legislators about the importance of the issues you care about — and how their support can advance opportunity for Iowans.

## What is Your Legislator's Job?

Your Iowa legislators do more than just vote "aye" or "nay" on bills. They are responsible for:

### Lawmaking

- Studying, discussing and voting on proposed legislation
- Allocating money to state agencies and programs
- Creating, modifying and abolishing state laws and programs as necessary
- Settling conflicts, righting injustices and making authoritative decisions

### Representing

- Serving constituents living in the district
- Doing what is in the best interest of the state as a whole
- Acting as a liaison between citizens and state government

### Monitoring

- Overseeing the work of departments and agencies funded by the Legislature
- Ensuring that laws are being carried out according to legislative intent
- Confirming the Governor's appointments and responding to vetoes
- Keeping the lawmaking process open and honest

The information you share with them will help them effectively fulfil their responsibilities.

# Preparing for your meetings

## Before you arrive in Des Moines

- **If traveling in a group, designate one individual to act as a spokesperson.** This will save time and avoid confusion when you are speaking with your legislator. This person can start the meeting by introducing your group and topic and keep the meeting moving along.
- **Designate one person to take notes.** This is a very important way of keeping track of what is said and making sure any information requested by your legislator gets back to them.
- **Make sure you have thought out your arguments ahead of time.** Concentrate on just a few main points, and have your facts ready! Consider preparing a one-page summary to hand your legislator. It should highlight your position and the data to support it. If a policy has helped your program created 15 new child care spaces or reduced the waiting list for mental health services in your community by 20 percent, say so!
- **Include people who can tell their own stories.** It is very effective for people to illustrate the real-world impact of policy decisions. One personal story is often as effective as a lot of data.
- **Plan plenty of time to get there.** Parking on the Capitol complex can be hard to find. Make sure you have enough time to park and walk. You can enter the Capitol on either the west side (facing downtown Des Moines) or south side (facing the Iowa Supreme Court). You will need to go through security to get inside. You will enter on the ground floor—two floor below the House and Senate chambers.



## Start with brief introductions

- When the legislator appears, your spokesperson (that may be you!) can start by introducing themselves and your group as constituents interested in \_\_\_\_\_ (i.e. early care and education, mental health, water quality or food security).

For example: "Hello, Representative Smith. My name is Mary Brown and I am the owner of the Happy Child Early Learning Center in Fort Dodge. Thank you for making the time to meet with me and my colleagues from Webster County about child care assistance. I am going to act as a facilitator for our meeting with you."

- Briefly have each group member introduce themselves. Tell the legislator how you're connection to the issue and where you live. The main point here is to give the legislator a sense of who is visiting them and reinforce that you are constituents (this is important). Don't take too long in doing this.

## Move quickly to your main message

- After introductions, state why you are there.

For example: "Representative Smith, we came to Des Moines this morning to let you know how Child Care Assistance has benefitted families and employers in Webster County, and share our priorities for improving the program. This flier shows ...

- Give the Representative or Senator your printed material and summarize your key points.
- Have the one person most familiar with a specific point make the case. For example, have a parent who lost her child care subsidy tell the legislator how it has restricted her ability to work.
- Be sure the appointed person takes notes of what is said at the meeting.
- Ask your legislator questions so you can most effectively connect your priorities to their goals: What is of most interest to you? What concerns do you have? Can we count on you working with us during the upcoming legislative session?

## Conclude

- If appropriate, invite the legislator to visit a facility, site or program back in their district to learn more. Finally, thank them for their time.

# After your visit

Be sure to send a follow-up thank you letter! A thank you letter allows you to emphasize your main points once again and make any additional points you may have forgotten. Here is a sample:

[Date]

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
Iowa [House of Representatives/Senate]  
State Capitol  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear [Representative/Senator] \_\_\_\_\_:

I am writing to thank you again for taking time from your busy schedule to meet with us during our visit to the Capitol. We appreciated the opportunity to discuss the well-being of children in \_\_\_\_\_ County and the role that early care and education is playing to improve their lives and insure that each child arrives at school ready to learn.

We hope you found the information we left with you useful. We know you share our hopes and will be working hard to \_\_\_\_\_

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*[Use this space to reiterate the main points you made in your conversation. For example: "... ensure that low-income families can .... .]*

Please let me reiterate our offer of assistance. If you are ever in need of any local data or have questions about our work, please let me know. We also encourage you to come and visit our child care facilities to see firsthand the work we are doing. We would welcome being your host for the day.

Thank you for seeing us and for all you are doing to keep young children and their needs a priority in the public agenda.

Sincerely,

Name

Title of Organization

# Key strategies to remember — or avoid

## Do

- **Be Polite.** The proper form of address is: “Representative Smith” or “Senator Smith.”
- **Be yourself!** You don’t have to use fancy language or big words. It is most effective to talk to your legislator in your everyday style.
- **See everyone you can.** Don’t write off a legislator because of their past lack of support. You never know when they may rethink their position. Also, be sure to see those legislators who support you, even if you have seen them recently. They need your continued affirmations — and to see your commitment!
- **Concentrate on things back home.** Your legislator is interested in what investments have done to improve the lives of their constituents and their ongoing needs. They are less interested in what is happening statewide.
- **Be specific** about what you want the legislator to do. Concentrate on one or two items.
- **Choose one member** of your group to be the primary spokesperson. This does not mean others can’t speak, but it helps to have one person make the initial comments and main points.
- **Be enthusiastic** about the future and proud of your hard work.

## Don’t

- **Be shy** about being with your legislator. Remember, it is their job to meet with you and listen to your concerns. You have a right to be there!
- **Be discouraged** if your legislator is late or can’t meet with you. They really do care about meeting you, but sometimes things happen at the last moment in committee meetings or on the House or Senate floor they **MUST** be present for.
- **Get angry.** Even if a legislator just won’t be supportive, thank them for their time and offer to be of assistance in the future should they need information.
- **Threaten.** Legislators already understand all their actions at the Capitol will be at issue in the next election.
- **Lie or misrepresent facts.** Legislators will usually find out at some future date and it will hurt your credibility. If you don’t know the answer to a question, tell them you’ll follow up – then do!

# How to Contact Your Elected Officials

## Legislators

### State Senators

#### By mail:

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
Iowa Senate  
State Capitol  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Begin correspondence to your senator  
with the greeting:

Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_

#### By phone (during session):

(515) 281-3371; TDD: (515) 281-3789

#### By email:

(firstname.lastname)@legis.iowa.gov

### State Representatives

#### By mail:

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
Iowa House of Representatives  
State Capitol  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Begin correspondence to your  
representative with the greeting:

Dear Representative \_\_\_\_\_

#### By phone (during session):

(515) 281-3221; TDD: (515) 281-8455

#### By email:

(firstname.lastname)@legis.iowa.gov

## Executive Branch

### Governor

#### By mail

The Honorable \_\_\_\_  
Office of the Governor  
State Capitol  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear Governor \_\_\_\_:

#### By phone

(515) 281-5211

Ask to speak to the staff member that  
handles the issue you wish to address.

#### Online

<https://governor.iowa.gov/contact/>

### Lt. Governor

#### By mail

The Honorable \_\_\_\_  
Office of the Lt. Governor  
State Capitol  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear Lt. Governor\_:

#### By phone

(515) 281-5211

Ask to speak to the staff member that  
handles the issue you wish to address.

#### Online

<https://ltgovernor.iowa.gov/contact/>

# How to Get Legislative Information

## Legislative Information Office

The Legislative Information Office (LIO) is the primary contact for public, nonpartisan information about the Iowa General Assembly.

The office includes two public computer terminals for any member of the public to access legislative information on the Iowa General Assembly website ([www.legis.iowa.gov](http://www.legis.iowa.gov)).

The Legislative Information Office is located on the ground floor of Capitol, Room G160, at the foot of the east stairs.

Hours: 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m.  
Monday-Friday (extended hours when the Legislature is in session).

Legislative Information Office  
Iowa State Capitol, Room G16  
East 9th and Grand Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50319

Phone: (515) 281-5129 (LIO has no toll-free telephone number)

Call (515) 281-5869 for a voice recording of daily schedules for *Today in the Senate* and *Today in the House*, as well as interim schedules.

## Law Library

Information and research on the Code of Iowa; research on past legislation (1846 to present); 50 state codes and case law information; legal journals and individual titles on special subjects; federal laws; regulation and case law.

The Iowa State Law Library is located on the second floor of the Capitol, on west end.

Hours: 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m.  
Monday-Friday

Phone: (515) 281-5124

The Law Library has a public-access photocopier and fax machine for outgoing information (for a small fee).