

PRESENTING TESTIMONY

WHY PRESENT TESTIMONY? Testimony can be helpful in communicating your position to legislators, so it is important to know how to give it. Legislative bodies call for a public hearing for a number of reasons. Hearings may be held to inform the public about issues or for a legislative body to get the information it needs to draft laws or to find out whether legislation is needed. Hearings may also be scheduled as “window dressing” for decisions that have already been made.

Providing testimony can be helpful to a nonprofit and serves the useful purpose of:

- Requiring a group to develop a fairly comprehensive statement of its position
- Helping to establish your organization as an authority in your field
- Providing useful quotations for speeches and publications

In deciding whether or not to testify, remember that a decision against testifying sends a message to the legislators that your organization is not interested or, worse, that you have reasons to avoid questions on the subject.

It's also important to note that under the 1976 Lobby Law, a nonprofit's response to written requests from a legislative body (not just a single legislator) for technical advice on pending legislation, is not considered lobbying. So, if requested in writing a group could provide testimony on that legislation, and it would not be considered lobbying.

»» TESTIMONY COMPOSITION

Most legislative bodies have format requirements for testimony, including the number of copies you should have and when they should be delivered to the committee. The cover page of your statement should include the legislative committee before which you are testifying; the name, title, and organization of the person testifying; and the date. A written request is almost always required from a person who wishes to testify before Congress.



>> TIPS AT A GLANCE

- **Keep your statement brief**
- **Provide a one-page summary**
- **Oral statements should not be read word-by-word**
- **Testimony should be presented by a high-ranking, well-informed volunteer or the chief staff officer**
- **Plant questions with friendly legislators**
- **Indicate you are a constituent or represent constituents from the legislator's district**
- **Anticipate the opposing arguments and provide responses in advance to friendly legislators**
- **Get other groups to sign on to your testimony to strengthen the impact of the statement**
- **Ask committee members to vote in support of your position**

>> PRESENTATION TIPS

At congressional hearings, witnesses are usually asked to keep oral statements under five minutes, although a longer statement will be accepted for the record. Oral statements should not be read word by word. They should be given as much as possible from brief outlines that permit presenters to maintain eye contact with committee members. If you can't answer a question, it is perfectly acceptable to say that you don't have the information but will get it for the committee immediately.

The quality of your organization's statement is important, but the skill of the presenter is equally important in making a favorable impression for your cause. Testimony should

be presented by a high-ranking, well-informed volunteer or the chief staff officer or other senior staff of your group. You will want the person who will make the best presentation and be able to speak knowingly about your services. Even better, if one of the recipients of your services could present effectively for your group, give that person the opportunity.

>> WORKING INSIDE THE COMMITTEE

It is helpful to know in advance which committee members are likely to be present and whether or not they will be friendly. That information is often available from the staff of the legislator who supports your position. Plant questions with friendly legislators who you know will be at the hearing, so that you can get those questions and your answers into the public record. It is usually easy to do this by working with legislative staff members. If there will be witnesses unfriendly to your cause, anticipate the opposing arguments they will make and provide responses to friendly legislators. You can also provide questions to friendly legislators, which they can raise with an unfriendly witness, to make points for you.

In addition, if your organization is working closely with the chair of the committee holding the hearings, it is acceptable to ask staffers if they would like to have your group draft the opening statement for the chair. Staff people often welcome such statements as a starting point for the drafts they ultimately present to chairpersons.

>> HOSTILE QUESTIONS

You may get questions that seem hostile. It is perfectly acceptable to be direct in your responses, but always be courteous. If a legislator seems particularly hostile, make a special point of trying to see him or her later, or follow up your testimony with a letter that deals with the issues he or she has raised.

>> ASK FOR SUPPORT

Get other groups to sign onto your testimony to strengthen the impact of your statement. Finally, and most important, ask committee members to vote in support of your position.