

Elected officials need to know about the issues that impact the most vulnerable children and families in our communities. And as a constituent, it is up to you to make sure your elected officials know what you think and how they can help.

Here are some tips and tools you can use to be an effective legislative advocate:

- Educate yourself. Learn and understand the arguments for and against a cause or issue, and then you can take a position from an informed perspective.
- Educate others. Once you are informed, you can effectively explain your position to others. Share the pros and cons, then explain why you hold the position you do.
- Don't initiate a battle or conflict when the same change can be initiated through a consensus approach.
- Get to know candidates and incumbents. Remember, they may not be as informed as you are about the cause or issue you're fighting for. Educate them and treat them fairly.
- Find out who and get to know those charged with executing the laws, and provide assistance when possible.
- Most importantly, don't ever underestimate your power as a well-informed and determined individual. Every vote and every voice does count!

Contacting your legislator about your issue or cause is key to advocacy. So once you are informed, you'll need to meet with or contact the legislator or other political figure relevant to your cause. In Georgia, we have a "citizen legislature," meaning that a state representative or senate position is not a full-time job. Our legislature meets for 40 days each year, beginning the second Monday in January. You can find legislative contact information at **www.legis.state.ga.us**, the official web site for the Georgia Legislature. You can also find out who your elected officials are by visiting **www.congress.org**. Just type in your zip code to identify and contact your elected officials at all levels of government.

Here are several things to keep in mind when contacting your elected official:

- Begin by asking the legislator what he or she thinks about a bill, issue or budget item.
- Ask if there is a bill for which he or she is trying to get support, and if he or she is familiar with the bill or issue about which you are contacting them.
- Know your issue, including the bill number, so that you can reference it if needed
- Be direct and honest. Explain why the bill/issue/budget item is important to you and to his or her constituents. Legislators are truly interested in the thoughts of voters, and rely on individuals like you to provide information and opinions
- If you don't know an answer, offer to find out and get back to him or her. Then follow up.
- Even if your legislator doesn't agree with you, be courteous, and agree to disagree. Use the opportunity to move to another topic.
- Thank all legislators that you speak with for their time.
- Write a thank you note to the legislator if he or she does agree with you.