

GET INVOLVED!

*How Our Government Works &
How To Make Government Work For You*

BOOK TWO: HOW TO MAKE GOVERNMENT WORK FOR YOU



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Adapted for Area Board 6, 2004



Area 4 Board is a federally-funded state agency that protects and advocates for the rights of people who have developmental disabilities and their families in Napa, Solano, and Sonoma Counties.

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*How Our Government Works &
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BOOK ONE : HOW OUR GOVERNMENT WORKS

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What Can You Do For Your Government?
How Our Government is Set Up

BOOK TWO: HOW TO MAKE GOVERNMENT WORK FOR YOU

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BOOK FOUR: WORDS TO KNOW

Words to Know

HOW TO MAKE GOVERNMENT WORK FOR YOU

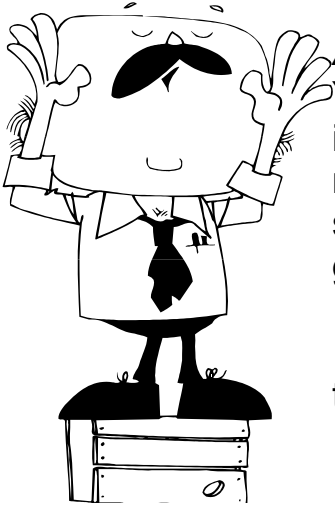


We talked before about what you can do for your government. You can advocate for the things that are important to you, and you can vote.

Your representatives make decisions that could change your life, so they need to know what is important to you. Remember, their job is to represent, or stand up for, you and the other people in their area. You can tell your representatives what you think about different things, like what services you think the government should spend money on, or how you would like them to vote on proposed (suggested) laws. You can also ask your representative for help when you're having problems getting services from an agency that gets its money from the government.

Voting is another way for you to affect what the government does. You can vote for who you want your representative to be, and you can vote for or against some proposed new laws. If you have never voted before, keep reading for information about why you should vote and how you go about voting.

ADVOCATING WITH YOUR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES



Advocating is speaking up for what's important to you. You have the right to tell your representatives what is important to you, if you agree or disagree with your representatives' decisions, or ask for help to get services from an agency that gets money from the government.

Here are two examples of people who took the time to advocate and got the results they wanted:

A few years ago, some of our elected state representatives in Sacramento were talking about reducing the amount of money paid to people who got SSI (Supplemental Security Income). Cleo Jean Manspeaker was worried about how she would pay her bills if she had less money every month. Cleo wrote to the Governor, her State Senator, and her State Assemblymember to tell them how reducing SSI would affect her life and asked them not to cut SSI. Many other people also wrote to their elected representatives asking them not to lower SSI. The Governor and Legislature decided that people who got services from Regional Centers would not get less SSI, but everyone else would get less SSI. Since Cleo gets services from a Regional Center, her SSI check stayed the same.

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ADVOCATING WITH YOUR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

Here's another example of a good advocate: a parent named Bill Coffelt had a son who received special education services. Bill went to many meetings about his son's education and wanted to be able to tape record the meetings. Under the laws at the time, Bill did not have the right to tape record his son's school meetings. Bill talked with his state legislator about why recording school meetings would help parents and students. The legislator looked into the issue and got a law passed saying that parents are allowed to tape record their son's and daughter's school meetings.

Just like Cleo and Bill, you should let your representatives know what is important to you. You can talk to your representatives about things you would like help with, your ideas for changes, and how their decisions affect your life. You won't always get everything you ask for because elected representatives have to balance your needs with the needs of many other people they represent. But if *you* don't tell your elected representatives what you need, they won't know how they can help you. And if there are too many times that you do not like your representatives' decisions, you can vote for someone else in the next election.

HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

Sometimes people want to be advocates, but they're not sure how to get involved or what their elected representatives are doing that will affect their lives.

One way you can get involved is to think about the things in your life that are important to you. Learn as much as you can about the things you're interested in by going to meetings, getting on mailing lists to get information sent to you, and talking to people.



For example:

* If you ride the bus and have ideas about how bus service can be better, you can write to your city or county transportation department (look in the Government section of your telephone book under "transit"). You can tell them your ideas for better bus service. Would a different bus schedule help you? Would a new bus stop make it easier or safer for you to get to your job? Does a certain route need more wheelchair-accessible busses?

* If you use a wheelchair or other mobility assistance and you find places that are not accessible, you can contact your city council member, county supervisor, state Assemblymember, or state Senator.

* If any elected representatives talk about lowering SSI, you can call or write your elected representatives to tell them how the cuts would affect your life.

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HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

* If you get In-Home Support Services and have trouble finding or keeping personal assistants, you can call your state Senator, state Assemblymember, or county supervisor to tell them that IHSS workers need more money or job benefits.

* You can go to city council meetings and county boards of supervisors meetings to learn about the services your city and county provides. There is always time at these meetings for people to make brief comments. You could let your city council members and county supervisors know what services are important to you.

* You could go to advocacy meetings or conferences to find out about current issues. People First of California is a group of people who have disabilities who advocate for themselves and for other people who have disabilities. People First of California has sponsored conferences about advocacy and they have meetings in Sacramento that anyone can attend. You can get more information about People First of California by writing or calling them at:

People First of California
120 "I" Street, Suite B
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 552-6625

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HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

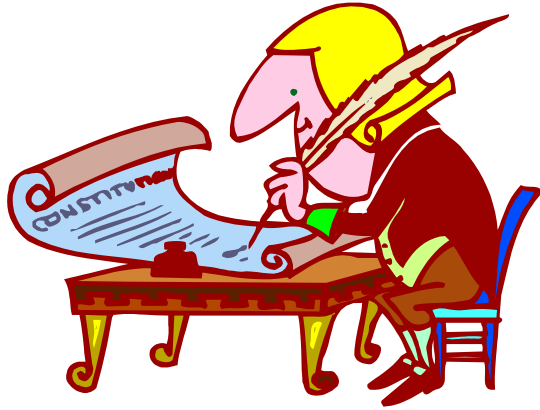


* If you are interested in legislation (suggested new laws) that affect people who have disabilities, you can call Area 4 Board to get information about bills that might affect your life. You can also go to Area 4 Board's monthly Legislative Committee meetings to learn about legislation and talk about how the legislation would affect people who have disabilities. To find out about legislation, call or write:

Area 6 Board
2529 W. March Lane Ste 105
Stockton, CA 95207
(209) 473-6930
(209) 473-6932 FAX
e-mail: info@areaboard6.org
website: <http://www.areaboard6.ca.gov>

When you learn about legislation that may affect your life, you can call or write your elected representatives to tell them if you think the legislation is a good idea, or if it should be changed.

To tell your representatives what is important to you or to ask for help, you can write to them or meet with them in their office. Whether you decide to write or meet with them, there are things you can do to have the most impact on your representative. In the following pages are some tips about how to write to your representative and how to prepare for a meeting with your representative.



WRITING TO YOUR REPRESENTATIVE*

Writing a letter to your representative is a good way to let him or her know what is important to you and how he or she can help you. When you write to your representative, there are things you can do to make your

letter have more impact:

1. Address your letter correctly. Elected representatives are called "The Honorable" followed by their name and address. For example:

*The Honorable Jesse Hernandez
California State Senate
State Capitol, Room 1000
Sacramento, CA 95814*

2. Say your name -- let your representative know who you are. For example:

My name is Corey Nguyen. I live in Santa Rosa, California. I work at a nursery.

3. If you are registered to vote, say that you are a voter. For example:

I am registered to vote. I have been voting for more than 5 years.



WRITING TO YOUR REPRESENTATIVE

4. Keep your letter to the point. Only talk about one thing that's important to you in the letter. For example:

I am writing to you about the SSI cuts.

5. Use your own words to say why this issue is important to you and how it affects your life. For example:

I live in my own apartment and pay all my own bills. I like being independent, but if my SSI is cut, I don't know what will happen to me. I might not be able to pay my bills and I might have to move.

6. Tell your representative what he or she could do to help you. For example:

I hope you vote against the SSI cuts.

7. Be polite and thank them for taking the time to write back to you. Be sure to write your address. For example:

*Thank you for reading my letter.
I am anxious to hear back from you.*

*Sincerely,
Corey Nguyen
123 Oak Street
Santa Rosa, CA 95401*

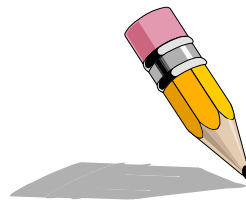
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WRITING TO YOUR REPRESENTATIVE

8. Some important "Don'ts":

- * Don't use a form letter - use your own words.
- * Don't swear - be polite.
- * Don't threaten - be reasonable and explain why you need your representative's help
- * Don't write too late - your representative can't help you if he or she gets your letter *after* he or she already voted or made a decision about the issue you are writing about.



*adapted from Self Advocacy Is.....People First by People First of Kansas City and The Legislative Process: A Citizen's Guide to Participation by the Senate Select Committee on Citizen Participation in Government.

MEETING WITH YOUR REPRESENTATIVE*

Besides writing to your representative, you can also go to his or her office to talk with him or her face-to-face. Oftentimes, the elected representative will not be available, so your meeting will be with the representative's staff person.



1. You need to call to set up an appointment (a day and time to meet) with your representative or a staff person. When you call your representative's office to set up an appointment, you will need to tell them your name and what you want to talk about. Let them know if other people will be coming with you. Ask how long your appointment will be so you can plan ahead. Appointments are usually about 15 minutes long.
2. Sometimes people get nervous when they meet with an elected representative. You can take a friend with you to your meeting. If other people are going to the meeting, everyone should meet in advance to get prepared. Decide who will speak first, and try to avoid repeating each other. Write down the things you want to talk about.
3. Be on time for your appointment and make sure you don't stay too long. If you stay too long, it may be hard for you to get an appointment in the future. Introduce yourself and everyone else should introduce themselves too, even if you have met with the representative or staff person before. Get to your point quickly. Tell your representative or the staff person what is important to you and what he or she can do to help. Ask for advice on what to do next. If the representative or staff person asks you a question, answer it honestly. If you don't know the answer, say so.

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MEETING WITH YOUR REPRESENTATIVE

4. Be polite to all the staff at the office. It won't help you if you argue or talk rudely to your representative or the staff. You want your representative to see things from your side.

5. Be sure to thank the representative or staff person when you're done. Ask to be kept informed about the issue you talked about and what action the representative takes.

*adapted from The Legislative Process: A Citizen's Guide to Participation by the Senate Select Committee on Citizen Participation in Government.