

November 13, 2009

Getting to Know Your Elected Officials

The Humane Society of the United States

We encourage you to meet and develop a relationship with the state legislators who represent you in your state's capitol as well as your U.S. representative and U.S. senators. Here are a few tips to get you started. If taking the first step makes you nervous, get a group together and plunge in!

There are 535 elected members of Congress and nearly 8,000 state legislators throughout the country. They are approachable. You can start with local officials such as the mayor or a city or county council member. Most state or federal officials began their careers in local government. If you are a constituent, simply call an elected official and ask them to meet you to discuss some issues of importance to you. Find out who represents you at humanesociety.org/leglookup.

Meet with elected officials. In some states, the legislative staff is large, but many other elected officials operate virtually on their own or with one aide. State legislators may have offices in the state capitol, but they spend most of their time in their home districts. Your members of Congress have offices in Washington, D.C. and several offices in their districts or across their states.

If you've never known how to take that first step, here are some tips:

1. Be politically active.

Put campaign signs in your yard, volunteer to work on a campaign, or attend political functions. Buy tickets to political fundraisers or work for a political party. Any legislator you actively support will get to know you and appreciate you! (Note: this is electioneering. As an individual you can help with political activities, but nonprofit organizations cannot.)

2. Involve your local animal shelter.

If you're involved with a good shelter, invite the politician to come view it. If the shelter has problems, ask him/her to come and discuss solutions. Invite the legislator to be a part of activities (such as spay/neuter clinics, rabies inoculation clinics, pet picture days, and rummage sales). He or she may be happy to be a master of ceremonies or just to be introduced to the crowd. Invite the legislator's pet, too! If the legislator is interested in getting a pet, encourage the adoption of a shelter animal. It's a good opportunity to explain your shelter policies.

3. Give awards.

If a public official is deserving of recognition, present him or her with an award. Do it publicly and invite the media. If you are presenting someone in your community with an award or certificate of appreciation, involve local elected officials. Let him/her know ahead of time so a letter of congratulations can be written. Include legislators' spouses at ceremonies and events. Often they are also interested in animal protection issues.

4. Drop names.

If your group works with a celebrity -- a famous athlete, singer, television or movie star, another politician, or government official -- invite your local state legislator to come and meet this person.

5. Make contacts through your many areas of interest.

If you can get to know an elected official while working on another issue of importance to you, do so. You can later use that relationship to cultivate his/her support on animal-protection issues.

6. Try the direct approach.

Call a legislator up and simply tell him/her that you would like to get better acquainted. Ask to meet with him/her at a convenient time to discuss areas of mutual interest. Offer to provide information on animal-welfare issues. Follow up with a thank-you note. Keep in touch with notes on local issues including those not related to animals.

7. Get to know legislative staff.

If the staff likes you, you are more likely to get to know the legislator directly. Offer to assist the staff so that they come to think of you as a resource on animal issues.

8. Say thank you.

Whenever appropriate, thank legislators for their actions. Publicize their good work in your humane society newsletter (or in other ways) and let them know you spread the word. If they voted correctly or took a stand on something important or requiring courage, drop them a handwritten note of thanks to let them know of your appreciation.

9. Send an invitation.

Invite a legislator that you'd like to meet to discuss the legislative process with members of your humane society and/or local animal protection groups. Ask him/her to speak to your group on how to be more effective.

10. Network.

If you ask around, you will probably find someone who knows the legislator and who could personally introduce you. This is especially useful if you are trying to make contact with a key legislator in another district.

If you spend time in the capitol when the legislature is convened, you will eventually get a chance to meet most legislators. Remember, even if a legislator doesn't agree with you on an issue you may be working on, don't antagonize anyone. A legislator may disagree with you on wildlife issues, but agree with you on dog and cat issues. Cultivate mutual areas of interest.

These suggestions should help you make contact with your state representatives or any other elected officials. You can make a tremendous difference for animals.