



MAINE ACADEMY OF
FAMILY PHYSICIANS

STRONG MEDICINE FOR MAINE

Testifying

There are two main venues in which a Key Contact may be asked to testify: a legislative committee hearing or a regulatory hearing.

The committee process is the first set of hurdles for a bill to become a law. Before a bill is voted on by the entire Assembly or Senate it must first be voted on by the committee that deals with the bill's main subject. For example, if a bill deals with medicine or medical issues, it will likely be sent to the Health Committee; if it deals with roads and transit, will likely be sent to the Transportation committee, and so on. In a committee hearing, legislators are given the opportunity to closely study a bill in a way not possible in a floor debate. Committee members may hear from many people who support or oppose the measure.

Your testimony may influence the committee's action. It also becomes part of the permanent record and may be used in future research. Effective testimony should not be a frightening or intimidating experience, but rather the use of common sense, personal relations and communication skills in a more formal setting.

Listed below are 8 suggestions to help make your presentation successful:

1. Know Your Audience

The members of the committee care that you have taken time out of your day to come and testify before them. Be respectful. Don't accuse committee members of causing your particular problem. Resist the temptation to scold, put down, or insult the decision makers or other witnesses. This tactic will likely alienate them from your cause.

2. Know the Issue

Support your personal opinions with as many facts as possible. Be knowledgeable of the "other side of the story." You may be asked to discuss the differences. Draw from your own knowledge and experience.

3. Be Familiar with the Committee Process

If possible, attend a committee meeting before you testify to become familiar with the process and room layout.

4. Know the purpose and approach for your testimony

Understand why you are testifying - whether you are there to persuade, dissuade, provide "expert" information, or delay action on a bill. Remember that committees are rarely persuaded on testimony alone. It is possible committee members have decided how they will vote before the hearing. Your testimony is intended to avoid losing votes and to justify previously decided positions. You may be advised to address the concerns only of those legislators who are undecided.

5. Carefully prepare your testimony

Know your subject. Have accurate facts or data to support your arguments. Never "wing it". Keep your testimony short and to the point.

6. Present your testimony effectively

Use a friendly, relaxed tone of voice. Avoid a monologue or a formal speech. Be conversational. Do not read to the committee. Practice several times before the hearing, so you are familiar with your tone, the flow, and your material.

7. Keep it simple

Don't use acronyms, jargon or technical terminology. If the underlying issues are complicated, simplify them before you talk. Use examples to emphasize and illustrate your points.

8. Answer questions briefly and cautiously

Thank the committee members and offer to answer any questions. Be aware that legislators may ask questions to help reinforce their own opinions and possibly to discredit your testimony. Some legislators' questions are meant to help you make a better case or explain something that was confusing. Prepare yourself for possible questions by finding out what concerns have been raised about the bill and the opinions of the legislators on the committee. Answer questions briefly and stick to the topic of the question. If you do not know the answer to a question, just say so, but offer to obtain the information requested and provide it to committee members.

MAFP staff will do everything we can to make sure you feel comfortable in testifying, and will help you prepare your statement. Remember to relax. The members understand that this can be an intimidating experience - they don't expect a perfect presentation.

(This material adapted from Oregon State Legislature: How to Testify; and Colorado Community Health Network: Tips for Testifying, and California Academy of Family Physicians: Testifying)