

# Tell Your Story: Self-Advocacy in Action Toolkit

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The Who, Why, and How of Contacting Your Legislators

and Having Your Voice Heard



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# Introduction

Staying engaged in the advocacy process is vital, especially for individuals with disabilities and their families. You are the expert in your own life. Your voice matters. By sharing your experiences, you can help shape policies that improve not only your life but also the lives of others in your community.

Elected officials make decisions on a wide range of issues, but they cannot be experts on everything. You have unique insights about the supports and systems that help you to live your best life. By reaching out to your legislators, you can offer valuable perspectives that highlight the lived experiences of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and their families.

Your personal story has the power to put a face to statistics. It can humanize complex issues and demonstrate to policymakers the real-world impacts of their decisions. Personal narratives create emotional connections, helping others understand the serious effects of policies and legislation.

We understand that sharing your story with elected officials can be intimidating or even scary. So, we are here to help. In this toolkit, we will provide you with the tools and strategies you need to effectively share your story and advocate for the policies that matter.

Your stories will show our elected officials how the bills they vote on impact the people they represent. Together, we can create a collective voice that drives meaningful change in our communities, state, and country.

## What This Toolkit Is

In this toolkit, you will learn:

- The three levels of government
- How a bill becomes a law
- How to find and contact your legislator
- How to meet with your legislator in person
- How to educate your legislator on disability issues
- How to deal with nervousness and anxiety

We will also include examples of how to introduce yourself to your elected officials, what an in-person meeting with legislators might look like, and an explanation of words that might be new or confusing to you.

Thank you for your commitment to advocacy. We hope this toolkit will help you on your self-advocacy journey.

# The Three Levels of Government

As you're sharing your story, you want to be sure you are speaking with the right person. If there is a specific issue that you would like to talk about with an elected official, you need to determine which level of government the issue falls under.

There are three levels of government. They are:

## Local

- Mayor, City / County Councils, Commissioners, School Boards

Examples of Local Issues: paratransit routes, accessible sidewalks, Mayor Advisory Council, accessible parks.

## State

- The governor is elected every four years.
  - Their job is to:
    - Provide leadership
    - Sign legislation into law
    - Veto
- House of Representatives members are elected every two years
  - There are 100 members in the Indiana House of Representatives.
- Senate members serve a four-year term with half of the members being elected biennially (every two years)
  - There are 50 members in the Indiana Senate.

Examples of State Issues: education, civil rights, insurance, state budget appropriations (how the state's money is spent), guardianship / supported decision making, trusts, Medicaid, and Medicaid waivers.

## Federal

- The president is elected every four years.
  - Their job is to:
    - Provide leadership
    - Sign legislation
    - Veto legislation
- United States House of Representatives
  - Representatives serve two-year terms. There are 435 voting members of the United States House of Representatives and 6 non-voting members.
- United States Senate
  - Senators serve six-year terms. There are 100 members of the United States Senate.

Examples of Federal Issues: Social Security, Medicaid, Affordable Care Act, Medicare, civil rights, Americans with Disabilities Act.

# How a Bill Becomes a Law in Indiana

## Bill Introduction

- A legislator introduces a bill in either the House or Senate, often inspired by constituent concerns or advocacy efforts.
- When bills are introduced, they receive a bill number and title. Bills introduced in each chamber are referenced as HB (House Bill) or SB (Senate Bill) to let you know which chamber the bill is in. For example, HB-1012 - Medicaid Matters is currently a House Bill in the House of Representatives.



## Committee Review

- The bill goes to committee, where members examine it closely, hold hearings, and may make amendments, or changes, before voting.



## Second Reading

- When the bill leaves committee, it has a second reading, where it is eligible for changes by all members of the house of origin -- the Representatives may change the House bills and the Senators may change the Senate bills.

## How a Bill Becomes a Law Part 2

### Third Reading

- During the third reading, all members of the house of origin vote on the now complete bill.



### Opposite Chamber

- Once a bill is passed in one chamber, it repeats the same process in the opposite chamber. For example, if a bill is introduced in the House, it must also be approved by the Senate. The bill numbers stay the same.



### Passage and Signing

- If passed by both chambers without any additional changes, the bill goes to the Governor, who can sign it into law, veto it, or do nothing. If the governor does nothing, the bill will become a law without a signature.
- If changes were made, the bill returns to the house of origin. The house of origin may vote to approve the changes made by the second chamber. It would then move on to the governor.
- If the governor vetoes a law, the legislature can override a veto with a majority vote.

# How to Find and Contact Your Legislator

- If you do not know who your elected officials are, you can find out at <https://iga.in.gov/information/find-legislators>. You will enter your address, and the website will tell you who your state and federal officials are.
- You will get information on where their office is located and their contact information. For your state legislators, you can call, e-mail, or mail a letter. Do not send letters via US mail to federal legislators.

## Making a Phone Call

- A staff member will be the one who answers the phone, or you may be asked to leave a voicemail message.
- You can leave a message with the staff member or voicemail expressing your support or opposition for a certain bill or sharing a policy issue you would like the legislator to be aware of.
- You can also request an in-person meeting with your legislator. The staff will ask for your name and contact information. If you are leaving a message, share your name and contact information (including your address).
- Before you hang up, thank them for their time.

## Sending an E-mail

- If you send an e-mail, be sure to introduce yourself as a constituent (someone who lives in their district).
- If you are contacting them about a specific bill, include the bill number and title in your e-mail.
- Share how you would like them to vote on the bill. Tell them how their vote will impact you, your family, or community. Share your personal story and focus on specific examples rather than general statements about your experience.
- Keep the e-mail brief. It should only be a few paragraphs. If it is too long or detailed important takeaways may be missed.
- Thank them for taking the time to read your e-mail and offer yourself as a resource if they have any questions.

## Remember!

- Be respectful. You can be passionate, but do not be aggressive or use inappropriate language. Threatening not to vote for someone can derail the conversation and make the elected official defensive and less likely to hear your story.

# How to Effectively Advocate and Tell Your Story:

## Meeting with your Elected Official in Person

- Be prepared with what you want to include in your story. Bring notes or note cards with bullet points if you need a reference.
- If you do bring notes, try not to read directly off them. Stories mean more when they come from the heart.
- You may be meeting with your legislator or with a member of their staff. Know who you will be meeting with or talking to before you share your story. If you can, learn about their interests to help build connections.
- If you are meeting with your legislator, refer to them as Senator (Last Name) or Representative (Last Name) to show respect.
- When telling your story, keep it short, relevant, and to the point. Legislators are busy and you may have limited time with them. Aim for 2-3 minutes for your key points and personal impact.
- Stay on track with the point you're trying to make with your story. Focus on specific examples rather than general statements about your experience.
- When telling your story, it's important to be respectful. You can be passionate but do not be aggressive or use inappropriate language.
- Threatening not to vote for someone can derail the conversation and make the elected official defensive and less likely to hear your story.
- If you feel nervous talking to an elected official, remember they are just people, and it's their job to represent you. Hearing your story will help them be better informed.
- If they ask you a question you do not know the answer to, do not guess or make something up. Tell them you do not know, but you can find out. You can reach out to The Arc of Indiana for answers to policy questions if you cannot find them.
- At the end of your conversation, be sure to thank them for their time.
- Follow up with an email to thank them again and to offer yourself as a resource if they have any other questions.
- If they vote the way you ask them to, be sure to follow up to thank them.
- Maintaining a relationship with your elected officials will help them get to know you better and see you as a valuable source of information. It will also help you to feel more confident each time you reach out to them or their office.
- Check in as you need, but do not overcommunicate. Elected officials have many constituents and receive many phone calls and e-mails. Reaching out too often without a real ask or need may make them view you as a pest or nuisance.

# Tips For Educating Your Legislator on Disability

## Topics

- Remember, your legislator may not have strong knowledge about disability related issues. You are the subject matter expert, so you are there to help educate them on what you're passionate about.
- Legislators may say something that you consider offensive. If they do, use that as an opportunity to teach them why.
- If needed because of your disability, explain that you may need extra time to make your point, and that the legislator will need to listen carefully.
- If you think your legislator is having issues understanding you, encourage them to ask questions.
- If you have a speech difference, let your legislator know they can ask you to repeat yourself or that they can repeat back what they heard you say to make sure you are communicating effectively.
- Tell them why the issue you are discussing matters to you – for example, if you're having issues with accessibility in your area, talk about how that negatively impacts you and others like you.
- If you use acronyms, be ready to explain what they mean. Not all legislators are deeply involved in the disability field. For example, if you say IDD tell them it means “intellectual or developmental disabilities”.

# How To Deal with Nervousness

It's okay if you feel nervous before meeting with an elected official; we all feel nervous or anxious sometimes. Here are some things you can try to help you manage your nerves when you are sharing your story.

- Practice what you are going to say. You can practice in front of someone you trust, in the mirror, or even record yourself. Being prepared will help you feel more confident.
- Remember, elected officials are just people. It's their job to listen and to represent their constituents. Hearing your story will help them be better informed.
- It can be helpful to stim and regulate your emotions beforehand. Do what works best for you!
- Ask a trusted friend or support person for feedback about what you plan to say and practice or role-play with them.
- Take deep breaths beforehand.
- If you misspeak or say something wrong, do not panic. Take a deep breath and start over. Everyone makes mistakes!
- Bring a fidget with you to help manage any nervous energy.
- Being nervous might make your mouth feel dry. Have a drink of water before you meet with your elected official.
- Remember that sharing your story can help make your life and the lives of other people with disabilities better. The more you share your story, the more comfortable you will be, and the easier it will get!

# Sample Introduction E-Mail

Dear Senator / Representative (Name),

My name is *(name)* and I am a constituent who lives in *(city, state)*.

I am person with a disability / family member of a person with a disability who utilizes Medicaid and Medicaid Waiver services. *Expand on the services you receive in a few sentences.*

These services provide for my health care and supports to be able to enjoy life with my family and friends.

I realize there will be many conversations taking place this session and in the months ahead regarding Medicaid. I invite you to ask me questions and learn from me about the importance of these programs and the difference they make in my life / the life of my loved one.

I can be reached at *(email)* or on my cell at *(phone number)*.

I look forward to talking with you and will be reaching out as more issues regarding Medicaid come up.

Sincerely,

(name)

# Sample Conversation for an In-Person Meeting with Your Elected Official

Here is an example scenario of what may happen in a conversation with your representative or senator. In this example, Adam Jones is a person with IDD who is speaking with Senator Smith about a bill to increase funding for transportation.

This is not a real bill; it's just an example to help you understand what a conversation with an elected official can look like.

When you see something in *italics*, it is showing you what is happening in this scenario.

*Adam arrives at Senator Smith's office. The door is open, so he walks in. A staff person is sitting at a desk.*

**Staff Person:** "Good morning. How can I help you today?"

**Adam:** "Good morning, my name is Adam Jones, and I have an appointment with Senator Smith."

**Staff Person:** "Yes, nice to meet you, Adam. Please have a seat, and I will get the Senator."

*Adam sits down in a chair. The staff person goes and tells Senator Smith that Adam is here. Senator Smith comes out of his office.*

**Senator Smith:** "Good morning, I am Senator Smith. It is nice to meet you."

*Adam and Senator Smith shake hands.*

**Adam:** "It is nice to meet you too, Senator Smith. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today."

**Senator Smith:** "Let's go into my office."

*Adam follows Senator Smith to his office and has a seat.*

**Adam:** "Senator Smith, I want to thank you again for taking the time to meet with me today. I am here to talk about Senate Bill 1234 and to ask you to vote in support of this bill. As someone with a disability who doesn't drive, transportation issues are very important to me. I used to have a job at Wal-Mart that I loved, but the paratransit in our district is not reliable. I was late too many times and lost my job, even though I was good at it. I can't afford to use Uber every day, and do not have any family or friends to get me to work every day. This bill would improve the paratransit in our district. This means I could get a new job and know I'd have a way to get to work on time each

day. I want to work, and this bill will help me do that. I have other friends who are in similar situations, and we would really appreciate you voting in favor of this bill.”

**Senator Smith:** “Thank you for sharing your story with me, Adam. I have been following SB 1234 very closely and appreciate hearing how it will impact your life. I want you to be able to work at a job you love and have reliable transportation to that job.”

**Adam:** “Thank you for listening. I am happy to be a resource to you if you have any questions about other bills that will affect people with disabilities. I am going to follow up with an email to be sure you have my contact information. Thank you for your time.”

**Senator Smith:** “Thank you for coming down. I look forward to meeting with you again.”

**Adam:** “Me too. Have a nice day!”

*Adam and Senator Smith both stand up and shake hands again. Senator Smith walks Adam to the door of his office. That evening, when Adam gets home, he sends Senator Smith an e-mail with his contact information, thanking him again and offering to answer any other questions he may have.*

# The Arc of Indiana 2026 Public Policy Agenda

## Executive Summary

The 2026 legislative session provides many opportunities to advance initiatives that will lead to greater independence for people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities (IDD).

### Overview of The Arc of Indiana's Legislative Priorities

- Support legislation to improve transparency and accountability for the state, providers, and families in the Medicaid program.
- Support policies that promote appropriate services for people with medically complex conditions.
- Support legislation and policy development that ensure any transition to, or expansion of, managed care reflects person-centered values and leads to better outcomes for people with disabilities.
- Support legislation to increase protections and rights for families of children receiving special education services.
- Monitor the Education Scholarship Account (ESA) Program to ensure families can navigate the program successfully and that students continue to receive needed services.
- Support legislation to ensure school access to licensed or board-certified behavior analysts for students whose treatment plans include applied behavioral analysis (ABA) therapy.
- Support legislation that increases employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

# Staying Involved

To stay informed on state and federal legislative issues, sign up for legislative updates and action alerts at: [arcin.quorum.us](http://arcin.quorum.us).

If you have received these updates in the past, please be sure to resubscribe through the new Quorum platform. It lets you follow our bills, easily contact your legislators, and more. Go to [arcin.quorum.us](http://arcin.quorum.us) to quickly resubscribe!

Want to follow The Arc and Self-Advocates of Indiana on social media? Just scan the QR code below to get connected.



[arcind.org](http://arcind.org) | 317.977.2375 | [saind.org](http://saind.org)

# Glossary

Some of the words in this toolkit may be new or confusing. Here is what they mean.

- *Acronym* – a shorter way to refer to a phrase (Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities) by using the first letter of each word (IDD)
- *Appropriations* – money set aside by a government for a specific purpose, like funding a project or program
- *Chamber* – either the House or the Senate
- *Constituent* – a person who lives in a specific area of a state or region and is represented by an elected official
- *District* – a specific area or region of a state used to decide who your elected official is
- *Federal* – referring to the government of the United States rather than a state or local government
- *Legislation* – bills, laws, or rules that are suggested or put into place by the government
- *Legislator* – an elected official (Senator or Representative) who makes laws
- *Narrative* – story
- *Policymaker* – another word for legislator, senator, or representative. A person who is responsible for creating rules or laws that guide how things work
- *Representative* – a member of the House of Representatives or someone who was elected to represent a group of people
- *Term* – the period of time that an elected official can be in office
- *Veto* – the power granted to a governor or a president to reject a bill that has been passed by both chambers of Congress (the House of Representatives and the Senate)