THE FINE ART OF LETTER WRITING

Writing letters to the editor, to legislators, or to TV and radio advertisers is a great way to convey your position on issues that impact the people you serve. And recipients do pay attention. Legislators want your vote. Advertisers want your business. When they get even a few letters from different people, it begins to have an effect.

When writing to an elected official:

• In the first paragraph of your letter, describe the bill you want your elected official to consider. Whenever possible, refer to a specific bill by name and number, and not just to a vague issue. Make clear what your position is, and what exactly you want your legislator to do (vote for or against the bill).

• In the next paragraph or two, explain who you are. Tell your legislator how the bill would affect you, your agency, the people you serve, or your community. Express your thoughts in your own words, and make specific references to key points in the legislation. A personal story is very effective, and is your best supporting evidence.

• In the last paragraph, reiterate your support or nonsupport of the bill and ask the elected official to state her or his position in a reply. Thank the legislator for taking the time to read your letter, and express the hope that he or she will give this important issue due consideration.

• Finally, sign your full name and address so your legislator can respond.

Here are some general tips on how to make your letter effective and get your point across, whether you’re writing to an elected official, a TV program sponsor or a letter to the editor of your local newspaper:

• Keep your letter short and to the point. Write about one issue in each letter. Remember, some recipients may read hundreds of letters each week.

• Letters should be in your own words. Petitions and letter-writing campaigns with identically worded contents are not as influential.

• Type or write legibly on your own personal stationery or letterhead. The envelope should be plain white and hand-written (don’t use pre-printed labels).

• You may write to any elected official, but you have more influence in your own district where you vote. If you are a constituent, say so. If you supported or voted for the legislator, say that also. (If you didn’t, say nothing.)

• Be polite. Avoid language that demonizes or insults the reader.

• Remember to say thank-you.