NATIONAL VOLUNTEER FIRE COUNCIL

Guide to Communicating with Elected Officials

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Introduction

This manual is intended to give National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) members information and advice on how to engage public policy makers at all levels of government in order to educate them about the needs of the volunteer fire and emergency services. As eager as volunteer emergency responders are to serve their communities, we often fall short when it comes to engaging elected officials in public policy discussions. Elected officials at every level of government frequently make decisions that affect the fire and emergency services, and they need the valuable insight that only you can provide.

This Guide focuses on giving you tools to effectively communicate with members of Congress but can be applied to interactions with state and local officials as well. Becoming a successful communicator on the legislative front is largely a matter of learning about new audiences – legislators and their staffs – and new environments – the halls of Congress and state capitals.

Like other large institutions or industries, the U.S. Congress and state legislators have their own rules and ways of working. You will have to learn a little about those accepted methods and approaches in order to develop and maintain the kind of relationships you need to establish with lawmakers and their key staff members. This manual will teach you some of the necessary how-to's and 'tricks of the trade' of grassroots advocacy.

"All Politics Are Local"

This is the phrase that Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, one of the most famous Speakers in the U.S. House of Representatives, used to emphasize the fundamental importance of grassroots opinion. The politicians with the most public support at the local level get themselves into office and stay there, and no elected official ever forgets this fact. When you step forward as a spokesperson of the volunteer fire and emergency services, national and local politicians from your s tate will listen and appreciate the expertise that you provide.

The Tools of Effective Communication

The objective of this manual is to learn how to effectively communicate with elected and appointed officials in writing, through e-mail, by phone, and in person. Tools for achieving this goal of effective communication are provided below.

Keep in mind these key points when communicating with government officials:

1. Make sure your communication is simple, concise and to the point.
2. Don't raise questions that you aren't prepared to answer.
3. Address the "5 W's" (who?, what?, where?, when?, and why?).
4. Whenever possible, work to build consensus.
5. Utilize the resources and assistance of the NVFC staff and state association partners.

Tool #1: Letters and Emails

A well-crafted letter or email is the most commonly used and effective means of communicating with elected officials. Their offices are set up to receive, log, and respond to constituents' letters. Your letter should be clear, concise, focused, and should usually be limited to one page. Follow up any broad statements with convincing evidence to support them. It should be polite and should compellingly make your case.

Here are the primary components of an effective letter:

Who: Include your position and the name of your department. It is beneficial to discuss the number of people in your department and the spectrum of activities that they engage in to protect the community.

Why: Right up front, clearly indicate the issue that you are writing about and your position on the issue. It is best to limit each letter to one issue or subject.

What: Be clear about the issue and what you want the legislator to do about it. It is often as simple as supporting or opposing a certain bill. Be specific in your request; i.e., use the bill number or its title if available.

Where: Discuss the aspects or areas where the legislation or issue impacts you and your department. Make sure to address the specific impact on your department's ability to provide quality protection for your community.

When: Look to the NVFC or your state association for when the issue is expected to be acted upon, and let the legislator know. If time is critical, say so!

Tips for Writing Effective Letters

- Be straightforward and clear in your wording. Remember your audience – don't assume that they understand what you do.
- Always address the "What" that you are writing about in the first paragraph of the letter. If possible, include it in the first sentence of the first paragraph. Reiterate the "What" in your closing paragraph as well.
- Use facts to back up your opinions. Even though it is best to keep the letter itself to one page, it is useful to attach supporting materials whenever possible.
- Use your credentials to establish your expertise without boasting.
- Never be confrontational, even when you have reason to believe that the official you are writing to may hold a view different than your own.
- If you are sending a letter through the mail, be aware that it can take as long as two weeks for that letter to be processed by security before it is delivered to a Congressional office. If time is critical, it is better to send the letter by email. You can do this in addition to or instead of sending a printed letter.

Example Letter

The following is an example letter regarding the fictitious Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program.

Dear Senator _____:

As [chief, captain, firefighter] of the Generic Volunteer Fire Department (GVFD) in Generic, MI, I am writing to ask you to sponsor S. XXX, The Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program Act, which would provide funding to volunteer fire departments to purchase equipment and training (see attached/enclosed fact sheet from the National Volunteer Fire Council). GVFD has 86 members and protects a population of 5,000. Last year, we responded to 250 calls, our members logged 3,400 hours of training, and our Youth Fire Prevention program reached 631 children in Generic.

GVFC operates on an extremely tight budget, which we are only able to maintain because of private fundraising. Our personal protective equipment (PPE) is, on average, seven years old and half of our self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) were manufactured before the year 2000. Without functioning PPE and SCBA, our department could not provide fire suppression services. The Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program is critical to helping departments like ours purchase new PPE, SCBA, or address other significant areas of need.

Again, I urge you to sponsor S. XXX. If you have questions about the Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program or anything else related to the fire and emergency services, please feel free to contact me directly at XXX-XXX-XXXX or [email address] or contact the National Volunteer Fire Council at 202-887-5700 or nvfcoffice@nvfc.org.

Sincerely,

[Name]
[Title]

Enclosures

The details in the above example letter are designed to give you an idea of things you might want to include in a letter of your own, not hard and fast rules about details that you must include in any letter that you write. If your department only responds to a handful of calls per year, you probably don't want to cite that in your letter. Maybe your department protects a small population but responds through mutual aid agreements to communities with larger populations. Maybe there is a recent incident that drives home the importance of your department better than citing statistics would. The key is to include details about why your department is important.

The second paragraph explains the link between the Volunteer Fire Department Grant Program and GVFD. If you were writing about a bill that provides benefits to volunteer firefighters, you would want to include details about your department's recruitment and retention efforts instead of PPE and SCBA.

Notice that all of the details are local. This is who we are, this is who we serve, this is what we need, and this is why the program is important to our community. This gets back to "All Politics is Local." The NVFC has information at www.nvfc.org on all of its legislative priorities that you can attach or enclose to explain a policy or program in greater detail and address national issues. This is important background information that your elected officials will want to know after you've made them understand why a particular policy or program is important locally.

Tool #2: Visits With Elected Officials

A personal visit generally has more immediate impact and leaves a longer-lasting impression than a letter. Every member of Congress has at least one local office in the district that they represent, and most have several.

Congressional district offices are staffed with people whose job it is to communicate with constituents like you. There are no barriers to stopping by these local offices and establishing relationships with the staff, who are essential advisors to legislators.

When the Legislator is Home, You're Invited

Most Representatives and Senators frequently travel to their home districts and states to meet with constituents, consult with their district staff, and keep in touch with local issues and voters. It is all set up for you. Simply call a district office to make an appointment to meet with your elected representative when they are back in town. This will be easier if you have already established a relationship with the district staff.

As your relationship with the elected official and his/her office develops, you may want to invite them to tour your department so that they can see firsthand what it is that you do. Representatives and Senators enjoy making these visits because it is an opportunity for their own public relations efforts. If you are going to be in Washington, D.C., set up an appointment to visit your legislators in their Congressional offices. They appreciate you sharing your views with them in Washington.

Tips for Meeting Legislators

- Before the meeting, let the NVFC national office know that you have scheduled a meeting. They can provide you with valuable information about the legislator and his or her position on specific issues or legislation. Oftentimes, your state association can provide the same type of assistance when you are planning to meet a state legislator.
- Make sure that you call ahead of time for an appointment and tell them what issue(s) you wish to discuss and whom you represent. When you call, ask to talk with the scheduler or whoever handles fire and emergency service issues. "Walk-ins," or people who show up at the office unannounced, are usually taken by whoever happens to be available at the time.
- Bring a one-page handout to leave behind for each point that you want to discuss. Make sure that the handout has a specific "ask" (i.e., please support or oppose a bill) and be sure to verbalize the "ask" during your meeting. Legislators and their staff always want to appear supportive, and if you don't ask them to take a specific action it is unlikely that they will commit to doing anything.
- Have an agenda so that you don't just chat until the clock runs out. Ask staff in advance how much time you will have and plan accordingly.
- Do not be disappointed if you only meet with staff. Staff members play a key role in advising elected officials.
- Volunteer yourself as a source of local expertise on fire and emergency service issues. If there is an issue that your legislator asks you for information about, it is probably already something that he or she is involved with and in a position to influence.
- Consider including other volunteer departments or community members in the meeting.
- Stick to the facts. Do not give way to emotional arguments or unsubstantiated opinions. NEVER stretch the truth or you risk losing credibility. It is better to admit when you don't know something, look into it, and get back to the staff with an answer in the near future.

- Be a good listener, even if the legislator disagrees with aspects of your position.
- Always follow up a meeting with a personal "thank you" note.

Tool #3: Develop a Public Relations Strategy

So, you've written to and met with your legislators and their staff. They understand your issues and may even be supportive of some of them. But what do the rest of their constituents think? Getting back to the example letter provided earlier, are the people of Generic, MI, going to be pleased if the Volunteer Fire Department Grant program receives a funding increase? Will they understand the connection between the funding increase and the services they receive?

One of the most effective ways to get your issues addressed is to build public support for them. You can use this as a specific tool for communicating with elected officials or just to raise awareness generally. The more that the public understands your issues the better the likelihood that you will achieve your public policy goals.

Tips for Getting Your Message Out

- Regularly attend open local government meetings to give updates on the needs and accomplishments of your department. This not only serves to educate public policy decision-makers, it may get reported on in the local paper.
- Develop a media strategy for your department that includes a two-way dynamic with the media. Submit a press release or write a letter to the editor expressing your views to local media outlets. Make sure to send your legislators a copy if something you write gets printed in the newspaper or reported on in the local television news.
- Work with other volunteer and community-based groups. Building coalitions with other like-minded groups can make your voice stronger. During a dispute over the status of volunteer personnel in Montgomery County, MD, volunteers took their case to neighborhood associations. After being informed about the skills, training, and commitment required of volunteer personnel, not to mention the cost savings the community derived, the associations became very outspoken in their preference for preserving volunteer staffing.
- Designate one or two primary people in the department who will answer media inquiries and provide quotes. This could be the chief, but more importantly, it needs to be someone who is knowledgeable about the department's stance on key issues, will provide a consistent message, and interacts with the press on a regular basis.
- When something good happens to your fire department, let people know about it. If you get a federal grant, invite your legislators to the firehouse to make a presentation for local media. If a bill that you've been hounding your legislators to support is enacted, send a letter to the local paper to thank them publicly.

Tool #4: Use the NVFC Office as a Resource

The NVFC Government Relations staff is here to give you advice, answer questions, or act as a sounding board for you as you work to communicate with your elected officials. The Government Relations staff can be reached by phone at 1-888-ASK-NVFC (275-6832) or visit the NVFC at www.nvfc.org to find the e-mail address of the staff member that you wish to contact.

You can subscribe for free to the NVFC's E-update to receive monthly reports on what is happening in Washington, DC, as well as periodic breaking news alerts. Use the Resources section of the NVFC's web site for valuable information on a wide range of topics, including federal grants, the NVFC's legislative priorities, the Cost Savings Calculators, and the State Benefits Guide.

Tool #5: Congressional Procedures

This Guide has been designed to give you basic tools for communicating with your elected officials. Depending on the type of interaction you seek, the first four tools may be all that you need. For those interested in learning more about Congressional procedures and advanced techniques for getting your message heard, the following information will arm you with insider knowledge used by professional advocates and the keys to using this knowledge to your benefit.

Understanding Legislators

Objective: To understand the nature of your primary audience and the factors that influence and motivate them in their actions.

Major Points:

1. Many factors influence decision-making by legislators.
2. The daily work of Congress and state legislatures are in their committees.
3. Most legislators' activities are budget-driven.
4. Most members of Congress and state legislators are constantly campaigning for re-election.

Consider These Questions:

- Why do legislators pay so much attention to keeping in touch with constituents back home?
- How can the NVFC's grassroots activities help legislators stay in touch?
- In what ways are politicians reactive and proactive?

A Legislator's Typical Day

Legislating is a vague term and it does not sum up what a legislator really does most days. First, many people would be amazed at just how busy our elected representatives are. Most politicians' days are broken into ten-minute intervals (except for committee meetings, which can take hours) during which they:

- Shuttle between committee sessions
- Rush to the House or Senate floor to vote or speak on a bill
- Work with other legislators
- Meet with their staff or committee staff
- Meet with constituent groups – from Boy Scouts to the American Legion
- Meet with business, financial, and labor leaders among others
- Take briefings from administration and federal agency officials
- Attend morning and evening fundraisers and receptions
- Meet after office hours with staff
- Travel home to their districts on Fridays
- Spend weekends meeting with district office staff and constituents and attending local functions, then fly back to Washington to start the process over again

Getting a Word in Edgewise

It is obvious why it is not easy to get a conversation with a member of Congress or a state legislator. Even staffers often have to walk with them through the halls to get a moment of their time. As an active member of the NVFC, you are a prominent constituent from home and so it may be somewhat easier to secure a meeting. But you should always keep in mind just what a hectic, time-pressured life a legislator leads when you are making contact.

Committee Membership is Paramount

Members of Congress, as well as state legislators, tend to define themselves by the committees and subcommittees on which they serve. The responsibilities of committee membership take priority, and members tend to focus most of their attention on legislative issues under the jurisdiction of their committees. If your elected officials do not serve on a committee with jurisdiction over fire and emergency service issues, you may have more difficulty getting their attention.

Be Aware of the Importance of Legislative Staff

Because no single member of Congress can stay on top of all the issues that come before Congress, every member has Legislative Assistants (LAs). LAs are assigned to specific subject areas or committee assignments and become very knowledgeable on current issues. They will study your fact sheets, respond to your letters, arrange your meeting, and, most importantly, the LAs generally analyze issues and advise the Congress member of local feelings about the issue before any vote.

Every Vote Is a Balancing Act

Each vote has political implications, so each vote is taken very seriously. A politician can vote yea, nay, or present. Politicians will go to great lengths to avoid controversy or a vote that will come back to haunt them at election time. With that in mind, it is important to consider the political context of every voting situation and try to frame the NVFC position in clear, easy-to-understand terms with an honest assessment of the issue. In appealing to a politician for a vote, always try to consider each of the following elements that affect decision-making:

- Information: Politicians often suffer from information overload. Make sure they have all your information and that it is factual, accurate, and clear. The information you provide should always be concise, straightforward, and limited to one page.
- Necessity: Stress the timelines and urgency of the issue, especially for local volunteer firefighters/EMS personnel and the department where they volunteer.

- Fiscal Implications: Money and budgets always count, usually against us. Work fiscal responsibility and cost savings into your argument wherever possible. However, always humanize the impact of legislation by talking about how it impacts volunteers in your state.
- Politics: Know whether or not the vote you are asking for will go against the legislator's party line, and whether or what groups are against it. If there are apparent problems, directly address his or her concerns with sound counter arguments and effective counter examples. Never stretch the truth. If you do not know an answer, tell them so and that you will get back to them. Be sure to follow up.
- Visibility: All politicians are open to intense public scrutiny and must be prepared to justify their vote on any issue – not only to their local constituents, but also to the entire nation. Give them the support they need to make that justification.

Congress - Where the Action Is

Objective: To appreciate that power in Congress is centralized because of its leadership committee structure, and to understand that power in Congress is also diffused over many members and their staff members outside the leadership structure.

Major Points:

1. The majority and minority leadership in Congress are the critical players in determining legislative outcomes.
2. Committees are where most legislation takes shape and where most important legislative discussions occur.
3. Congressional staffers are key in the legislative system. Their opinions on legislation are very important.

Consider These Questions:

- What are the benefits and potential obstacles associated with the party in "control" in Congress?
- What are the merits and liabilities on the Congressional committee system?
- Why is it necessary for non-elected professional staff to play such a central role?

Who's In Charge?

The majority rules in Congress as in no other institution. It is the primary job of the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader to see that this always holds true. They set the agenda, they decide which bills will be brought forward, they assign members to committees, and they make rulings and interpret rules during a dispute.

In the minority party, leadership figures play a similar role. And both parties have powerful members called "Whips" whose job it is to ensure the members of their respective political parties vote the same way on critical issues.

Despite the power and privilege of the leadership, they can't always control how each individual member votes on specific issue. There are many points of view across the wide spectrum of any political party. Personal views have a bearing, and local concerns sometimes take precedence over the party line.

Line Up the Vote

Just knowing the political process and understanding all the considerations that can affect how a legislator votes makes you a player in the game. And nearly everything said here about the U.S. Congress also applies with activities in state legislatures across the country. To be an effective player at the national or state level, follow these basic guidelines:

- When you ask a legislator for support, keep in mind all the pressure they are under.
- Factor in the legislator's party line and whether you are asking him or her to go against it.
- Understand that legislation must pass both the House and Senate in the same form, and that a presidential veto can occur even if you win these votes.
- If you know of concerns the other side will have, address them and make sure your case is stronger.
- Always assume the legislator may have to accept a compromise somewhere along the line. Compromise is what makes democracy work.
- Encourage the legislator to make sure that the fire and emergency service's position is treated fairly.

Committee Staff Are the Gatekeepers

Just like in a personal Congressional office, much of the work in committees is done by the staff. This is especially true for committees where the issues are highly complex and specialized staff expertise is vital.

Committee staff is the conduit through which information flows to the chairs and committee members. There is majority and minority staff on each committee. All committee chairs are of the majority party and generally loyal to the leadership and party agenda. If the opportunity arises for you to spend time in Washington, D.C., here are some guidelines for dealing with Congressional committees:

- Try to build relationships with key committee staff. You can do this by becoming the resource they need for unbiased, factual information.
- Realize that committee chairs have control over what bills are heard by their committee.
- Committee chairs nearly always listen to their senior committee staff advisors.
- It is generally not wise to try to go "over the heads" of senior committee staff. They are integral participants in the legislative process.

How To:

Relationships with local decision-makers are critical to the operation of your department and the emergency services as a whole. Begin by developing a list of your national, state, county, and municipal elected officials and community leaders. Congressional representatives, state legislators, and city and county officials vote on matters that affect you.

That is the bottom-line reason for your grassroots involvement. Now that you know the reason, the following sections will tell you how to practice some basic grassroots techniques effectively.

How to… PUT A LOCAL FACE ON NATIONAL ISSUES

You Have a Great Story to Tell

You are an integral part of your community because you are a first responder to all emergencies - you protect the lives of the people in your community, and you volunteer your time.

As a local firefighter or EMT whose efforts generate enormous benefits for your community, people will appreciate your participation in community activities. Make the most of it! These activities can not only enhance your ability to provide quality protection, but also help establish in the public mind the link between the volunteer emergency services and the safety and well-being of the community.

Community Involvement Is the First Step

Just by getting to know elected officials in the course of community, county, statewide, and regional events, you make it less likely that they will target the fire and emergency medical services with burdensome legislation. Without a "human face" in mind, legislators are more apt to take what the fire and emergency medical services do for granted and may see them as easy targets.

How do you accomplish this personal contact? Just invest one or two hours a month in some form of community participation. This will gain recognition for you and the volunteer fire and emergency services. It will put that all-important "human face" on issues of vital importance to your department and other volunteers in your area.

You're The Expert

Elected officials need to know what you know. National and state legislators and other elected officials are just people. You can approach them with confidence. Their job is to listen to and represent their constituents. And constituents like you have valuable expert insight to offer.

Whenever you have access to a legislator, talk positively about the many ways your department is protecting and contributing to the community. Feel free to discuss issues you are concerned about as a volunteer firefighter or EMT.

Don't Just Chat

Talk about the people that you protect. Also, make it a priority to explain the potential positive or negative impact of pending legislation on your department, your community, and all volunteer firefighters and emergency services personnel.

Checklist of Objectives

1. Get to know your national, state, and local elected officials well enough to see recognition in their eyes.
2. Get to know the staff in your legislators' local district offices.
3. Write to your legislators about issues that affect your department. Also ask for their viewpoints.
4. Invite national and state elected officials to tour your department.
5. Enlist other community leaders to urge support of fire service and EMS issues.
6. Urge other citizen advocates to join with you in promoting fire service and EMS issues.
7. Urge churches, clubs, academic, civic, and consumer groups to discuss issues relating to the protection of the community by volunteer firefighters and emergency medical personnel.
8. Above all, know the facts. Make strong arguments, but it's not a good idea to back a legislator into a corner. Allow him or her to disagree with you.

How to… UNDERSTAND THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Learn the Legislative Process

Out of the thousands of bills introduced in Congress and the hundreds of thousands introduced in state and local legislatures, fewer than 10 percent are enacted into law. Among the bills that do get passed, many start out with just a small following and little public awareness. Therefore, it's very important to make your views known to your elected representatives as early in the legislative session as possible.

Aim for Prime Time

When is the prime time to present the NVFC's position on a proposed bill? After one or more legislators introduce a bill, it is referred to one or more Congressional committees responsible for the subject addressed by the bill. Usually the Congressional committee chairs will refer the bill to a subcommittee, which holds hearings on the measure. This is the prime opportunity to present strong, organized, well-documented testimony on any bill affecting America's fire and emergency services. The NVFC national office will help you to coordinate this process.

At the state level, this legislative and committee process works in much the same way, and it is the focus of much of the work by each state association affiliated with the NVFC.

How the Process Works

1. The subcommittee with jurisdiction votes on whether to refer the bill to the full committee for action or to reject it.
2. If the committee votes to pass the bill, it is forwarded to the full House or Senate where the leadership decides whether or not to bring it to a vote.
3. If and when the House or Senate passes a bill, it goes to the other body where the process of referral, debate, and committee and subcommittee hearings starts over.
4. If both the House and Senate pass a similar, but not identical, bill, a joint Conference Committee will be appointed to work out a compromise, which is then sent to each body for a final vote.
5. If approved by both bodies, the bill goes to the President (or governor in the case of state legislation) who will either sign it into law or veto it.
6. Congress can override a Presidential veto if two-thirds of the members of the House and Senate vote to do so.

This is a simplified scenario, and most proposed legislation goes around many more twists and turns – with changes and compromises at every turn. The important thing is that at every stop of this long and involved process, NVFC members have the opportunity to make their views known.

How to… REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Personal relationships are the key to business success. The same is true in politics. Get to know the national and state officials who represent you. Constituents who call, write, appear in person at public events, and visit their legislators will get attention. Follow these tips for maintaining these relationships:

- Make sure you have their local office phone numbers.
- Put reminders on your business calendar to keep in contact with them.
- Look at the emergency service issues that are before legislators, and share your knowledge and expertise with them via letter, email, or phone call.
- Ask for their position on any issue of importance to your department.
- Follow up any phone call with a letter and ask for a written reply.

Your Views Have Clout

Elected officials listen to constituents. Remember: It is you, not them, who is the expert on the volunteer fire and emergency services. Legislators look to local knowledge before voting on complex issues dealing with firefighters and EMS personnel. Thus, legislators expect to hear from you on issues of importance to your department.

Prepare for your political calls just as you would for a business call:

1. Educate yourself thoroughly on the issues.
2. Develop a message and make a case for each issue.
3. Condense these arguments into two or three powerful selling points.
4. Practice your delivery until you feel comfortable and confident in your presentation.

How to… ENLIST THE HELP OF THE NVFC AND YOUR STATE ASSOCIATION

To help you get your grassroots initiative going, you should look to the NVFC national office or your state association for:

- Background material on legislative issues.
- Background on your legislators and their support for our issues.
- Assistance in preparing to meet with your legislators.
- Assistance in dealing with the press.

Remember to encourage others to sign up for the NVFC's E-update newsletter to stay on top of current events affecting volunteers. Call us at 202-887-5700 or 888-ASK-NVFC (275-6832) or visit our web site at www.nvfc.org.

How to… WORK WITH DISTRICT OFFICE STAFF

A major key to being a successful legislative advocate is building relationships with staff in an elected official's local office. Specific staff members in each office are responsible for legislative issues that have a local impact. Discover who they are – and get to know them.

- Get acquainted with the district office staff of your Senators, Representatives, and state legislators.
- Stop by and see the staff to offer your personal assistance and to provide background information on the volunteer fire and emergency services.
- Offer to be a referral source for people who call their legislator regarding emergency service issues.
- Always leave your business card with staff no matter how many times you visit.
- Make certain the district office staff has information about your department and offer them a tour.
- Once you have made contact among the staff, send them copies of your department newsletters and other publications.
- Invite interested staff members to special events.

All this will make you a familiar face and name around your elected lawmaker's local base of operations. When local experts are sought, you will be a natural choice.

How to… WRITE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor are widely read in local and regional newspapers and magazines. Many elected officials assign a staff person the job of reading all letters in any newspaper that circulates in their home district in order to keep a finger on the public pulse.

Any issue facing the volunteer fire service is a potential topic for a letter to the editor. Your letter does not have to be long or written in high-blown oratorical language. It's usually best to present your position in a simple, positive, and rational way. Avoid personalities and emotions. Be straightforward and sincere. Most of all, be concise – one page maximum.

Try it. Write a letter on a subject that you feel comfortable with. Keep in mind that the NVFC staff can assist you. Mail it to the editor of your local paper. See how good you feel when you see it in print!

Always be sure to send clippings of any published letters to the editor on the fire and emergency services to the NVFC national office. Every letter helps build our case. We can reprint letters to the editor and use them as an informational tool.

How to… MAKE GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES PAY OFF

As you consider how much time and effort to invest in public affairs activities, consider what is at stake: your department, your fellow volunteers, your future.

National and state legislators have immense power over the future of volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel. A stroke of a pen, a behind-the scenes agreement on Capitol Hill, or a committee room in your state legislature can impact the emergency services any day of the week.

Know the Rules of the Game and Protect Your Interests

First, educate yourself about the political process and the part you can play in it locally. Then educate your fellow firefighters or EMS personnel. There is strength in numbers, especially when the goal is to win the attention of elected officials who are always counting votes and looking to their next election campaign.

Here is a brief review of your goals:

- Get involved.
- Encourage other volunteers to get involved.
- Create opportunities to tell your story.
- Become recognized in your community.
- Gain the positive attention of elected officials.
- Establish and develop personal contacts.
- Win access to national and state elected officials.
- Learn the political game – and become a skilled player!

The Price of Inaction is High

When local voices are not raised because everyone is expecting "someone else" to act, we lose the initiative. The kinds of broad-based national and state initiatives that benefit all volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel lose their momentum without LOCAL initiative.

Now, Let's Get Active!

It is in your interest to take a leadership role. We have issues that the public needs to know…and elected officials need to hear from as many constituents as possible. When you step forward to speak out, you help your own department, as well as volunteers across the nation.

Remember, an individual in a democratic society can make a difference by helping to MAKE IT HAPPEN.