

Advocacy Tools: How to be an Activist for Social Reform

Contacting elected officials may seem intimidating at first, but it gets easier with practice. Most Members of Parliament are pleased to hear from their constituents and will be friendly and approachable. There are many ways you can communicate with your representative, so you can choose the one with which you feel most comfortable. Even the shortest letter from a constituent speaks volumes. As one person, you can speak for many who feel the same way but do not write, and in the process promote positive change.

Using the influence of your citizenship can be done in creative, simple, and effective ways. The following are some tools you can use as you start on the road toward advocacy.

Contacting your Member of Parliament

Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected to represent their constituents in Ottawa. They want to know about issues that are important to their constituents and ideas for addressing these issues. Most MPs welcome hearing their constituents' ideas and opinions, as long as they are expressed in a respectful manner.

If you have moved away from home to study, you may contact the MP in your home riding, or the one in the riding in which you currently live. Generally you would contact the MP for the riding in which you will vote in the next federal election. To find out who your MP is, go to www.parl.gc.ca and enter your postal code.

You may contact your MP by letter, email, in person or by phone. Here are a few things to keep in mind when considering the options.

Writing letters

Letter writing is a great tool for students since it is effective, it takes very little time and it is virtually free - sending a letter to Parliament Hill doesn't require postage! Even as few as twenty letters on the same issue can get the attention of an MP, Cabinet Minister or the Prime Minister and put the issue higher up on their agenda. Letter writing gatherings at group meetings are a great way to generate dozens or hundreds of letters at one time.



Here are some tips for writing letters to your MP, a cabinet minister or the Prime Minister:

- Keep it brief – in general, letters should be no longer than one page
- Get to the point – clearly state the issue you are concerned about in the first sentence or paragraph
- Be specific – mention only one issue in a letter
- Offer a solution – don't focus on criticism, but offer some solutions or alternatives to the current policy
- Be respectful – angry letters tend to be dismissed; strong wording might be appropriate, but keep the tone of your letter polite
- Use proper titles – the Prime Minister should be addressed as “The Rt. Honourable (full name)” and the letter started with “Dear Prime Minister”; Cabinet Ministers should be addressed as “The Honourable (full name)” and letters begin with “Dear Mr./Madame Minister” and MPs should be addressed as “Mr./Ms. (surname), MP”.
- Copy your MP – when writing a letter to a Cabinet Minister or the Prime Minister, it's always good to send a copy to your MP
- Make it personal – personalize the letter by putting the issue into your own words and signing the letter by hand
- Ask for a response – ask the elected official what will be done to address your concern and invite them to respond; if you receive a letter in response, write back to say thank-you!

Sending an Email

Email is one of the easiest and fastest ways to send a message to your MP. Although it is not as personal as a meeting or a phone call, most MPs pay attention to the number of messages they receive on an issue via email.

Be sure to identify yourself as a constituent up front. Remember to use the subject line to draw attention to the issue. The tips listed above for letter-writing will be helpful for email writing as well.

Meeting in Person

A face-to-face meeting is always best if it can be arranged. Contact the constituency office for your local MP to see if scheduling a meeting is possible. Contact information is available at www.parl.gc.ca.



To prepare for the meeting, do background research on your MP's biography and his or her involvement on different committees within parliament. Learn more about the position of the party your MP belongs to on the issue you wish to discuss (e.g. AIDS). Learn about Canada's current policies on the issue, and be clear on what you are requesting.

It is a good idea to jot down a few notes containing the key points you want to make, since the meeting will probably be quite quick. Be clear on what, specifically, you wish to ask, and how your MP can help with this request. Depending on who the MP is, it might be appropriate to ask him or her to raise the issue with the Prime Minister, or the leader of their party.

After the meeting, follow-up with a note or letter re-iterating any promises that were made during the meeting and thanking your MP for taking the time to discuss the issue.

Making Phone Calls

Calling your member of Parliament can be very effective, especially in the days leading up to an important vote in parliament. To prepare for the phone conversation, jot down a few notes containing the key points you want to make, and refer to the notes during your call. Keep your message brief; it is important to request a specific and measurable action.

Unless you know your elected official personally, you will speak to someone on his or her staff. If no one is available to speak, leave a message with the receptionist containing your name, address, and phone number, and be prepared to try again!

Contact Information

To find the name and contact information for your MP, go to www.parl.gc.ca and enter your postal code. Letters sent to the House of Commons or the Office of the Prime Minister via Canada Post do not need postage!

(Name of MP or Cabinet Minister)

House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington St.
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2



Other Advocacy Tools

Here are more tools you can use to mobilize your community or campus chapter to advocate for AIDS issues:

1. **Register to Vote.** Voting should be the first way you choose to leverage your citizenship! Use your vote to support candidates who care about the poor and marginalized and who will support policies that affect women and children who are vulnerable to AIDS.
2. **Use lobby days.** Use days like World AIDS Day (December 1) to organize students to visit their MPs or to plan an event to draw attention to the issues. Getting media attention is another way to send a message to the community and your elected officials that this is an issue that you care about.
3. **Host campus forums and speakers.** Hold events to mobilize students on your campus by inviting speakers who are experts on HIV&AIDS to educate and encourage your campus into action. These speaking events can also help to mobilize your Acting on AIDS chapter and interested members of the community. Invite local politicians and members of the media to maximize the opportunity to raise awareness and encourage others toward action.
4. **Send e-mail alerts.** E-mail allows you to distribute detailed information, instructions, and sample letters to MPs or the Prime Minister to large lists of individuals in an inexpensive and convenient way. The ability to forward an e-mail helps engage others who may not be involved directly in the issue but who would be willing to take action, if asked.
5. **Start a postcard campaign.** Postcards provide sound bites of information to send to the Office of the Prime Minister in support of upcoming legislation. Postcards are easy to make and distribute, and they can be effective in educating students about the issue.
6. **Write “Letters to the Editor.”** Most magazines and newspapers include a “Letters to the Editor” page where readers can respond to a specific article, offering a critique or praise for the way the publication covered an issue. Follow the way your campus or community newspaper covers issues related to AIDS, and use these articles as an opportunity. Letters to the Editor allow you to reach a larger audience and create an impression of widespread support for or against an issue.
7. **Plan a media stunt.** Attract attention of the local media and your MP by planning a creative action or “stunt” on your campus or in your community to raise awareness about AIDS issues. Do this on World AIDS Day (December 1) or another significant day.



HIV & AIDS Policy

The following list contains specific legislative goals supported by World Vision and Acting on AIDS. These objectives focus on governmental actions that will benefit the biggest victims of the AIDS pandemic, primarily orphans and vulnerable children. This list can be used as a platform for your advocacy campaigns.

- We urge Canada to contribute its share to providing universal access to treatment, prevention and care for women and children living with HIV&AIDS by 2010.
- We urge the Canadian government to allocate a minimum of 12% of all HIV&AIDS funding toward orphans and vulnerable children; these funds would support families caring for orphans and vulnerable children to access health care, education and nutritious food
- By 2010, ensure that at least 80% of adults and children in need of treatment have access to appropriate anti-retroviral therapy
- By 2010, ensure that 80% of HIV-positive pregnant women have access to prevention of mother-to-child-transmission services
- The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM) was established in 2002 under the urging of the United Nations to dramatically increase the amount of funding available to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. Funding is mainly provided by governments and foundations, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. World Vision feels that the Global Fund is a valuable, multi-lateral mechanism for funding AIDS programs globally.

Please note that as government policies change, World Vision's call to action will also change. Stay tuned by joining the Acting on AIDS email list (send an email to actingonaids@worldvision.ca) or by joining World Vision's Justice Network at www.worldvision.ca/justice.

Need More Help?

These documents are meant to be a starting point for in setting up your own Acting on AIDS chapter on your university or college campus. More information about HIV & AIDS issues and Acting on AIDS is available at www.worldvision.ca/actingonaids (Canada) and at www.actingtonaids.org (USA). To get in touch with chapters at other schools, inquire about guest speakers from World Vision Canada to speak on HIV & AIDS or ask any questions, please contact actingonaids@worldvision.ca.

