How to testify at a public hearing

Legislative public hearings have become less and less user-friendly over the years, but remain an important opportunity for advocates to raise awareness of their issues.

Public hearings are held early in the session by legislative committees to collect public comment on bills they are considering. If you are tracking a bill and want to testify about it:

- Hearings are listed in the Legislative Bulletin (Click on Bulletin at the bottom of the page, below the calendar) including date, time, hearing room at the Legislative Office Building, and the list of bills that will be considered at that hearing.
- Try to meet, call and/or write committee members before the hearing.
- Arrive early to sign up to speak. Find others who plan to testify on your bill.
- Each committee runs their hearings differently, but the first hour (or more) of the hearing is usually reserved for public officials - other legislators, agency representatives, other elected officials. Then the committee chairs begin calling speakers from the public sign up list, usually in the order you signed up. If you have a disability or a special need, talk to the committee staff.
- You will generally have only three minutes to speak, but do not rush. It is perfectly all right to speak for less than three minutes, but do not go over. A soft bell will ring when your time is up. Finish your sentence and thank the committee.
- Use your speaking time to summarize your points and refer the committee members to your written testimony for more detail.
- Speaking from your own experience is most persuasive.
- Try not to just repeat other speakers' remarks.
- After your three minutes, committee members may have questions for you. Answer briefly and accurately. If you don't know an answer, say so and tell them that you will get back to them.
- Be polite and respectful. Do not disparage anyone who testifies against your position. Point out the differences, answer any concerns, but do not get personal.
- Prepare written copies of your testimony. The Legislative Bulletin(Click on Bulletin at the bottom of the page, below the calendar) will note how many copies you need to submit to the Committee staff before you speak. Bring extras to share with other advocates and with legislators as you see them in the hall.
- Follow up - Write a thank you letter to the committee, include your testimony again and any updates or answers to their questions.

Again, testifying is often not a pleasant experience. You may arrive very early in the morning, only to find that you are far down the list of speakers. You may not speak until late afternoon or later. You may find that only two or three legislators are still at the hearing and the rest of the public has left.

But there are instances where a bill did not pass out of committee because no one showed up to testify in favor of it.