

Advocacy Tips

If you are interested in becoming an advocate for the rights of refugees and immigrants, you are encouraged to sign up to receive Action Alerts from our office through the “Rapid Response” System and/or sign up for the Church World Service “Speak Out” e-mail list.

Sign up for “Rapid Response” at:

<http://www.discipleshomemissions.org/pages/RIM-Advocacy>.

Sign up for “Speak Out” at:

http://www.churchworldservice.org/site/PageServer?pagename=how_adv_register.

Additionally, Church World Service (CWS) has an advocacy tool to help tell the story of service to refugees and immigrants, in order to counteract all the words spoken against them. SERVICE SPEAKS allows churches and advocates to send e-mail to a CWS e-mail address telling what they are doing to help refugees and immigrants. This material will be summarized in a report given to each Senator and Representative about what their constituents are doing to help. It will be suggested that the legislators consider that service rendered speaks louder than anti-immigrant phone calls to their legislative offices.

Learn more about SERVICE SPEAKS at:

<http://www.churchworldservice.org/site/DocServer/ServiceSpeaks.pdf?docID=1081>.

During the 2010 advocacy efforts for immigration reform, CWS also added a new web site with information regarding efforts calling for federal legislation on comprehensive immigration reform.

That site is <http://supportimmigrationreform.org/>.

Additional web sites with information on federal legislation on comprehensive immigration reform include:

Interfaith Immigration Coalition – <http://www.interfaithimmigration.org/>

Christians for Immigration Reform – <http://www.faithandimmigration.org/>

Reform Immigration FOR America – <http://reformimmigrationforamerica.org/>

National Immigration Forum – <http://www.immigrationforum.org/>

Understanding the National Legislative Process

Bills may be drafted by anyone, but only a member of Congress may introduce them for consideration. The member or members that introduce them become the sponsor or co-sponsors of the bill. Those introduced in the House of Representatives receive an H.R. number, and those introduced in the Senate get an S. number. Once a bill is introduced, it is usually referred to a committee for consideration. Once the committee receives the bill, it may be referred to a sub-committee or considered by the whole committee. If the committee does not act on a bill, it goes no where. Sometimes a subcommittee will hold hearings to provide the opportunity for supporters and opponents of the legislation to give testimony about the legislation.

Most refugee and immigration-related legislation in the Senate is referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee which usually refers it to the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and Border Security. In the House of Representatives, it is referred to the House Judiciary Committee which usually refers it to the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law.

After receiving the subcommittee's report on the bill, the full committee can hold further hearings, vote on the subcommittee's recommendations, or decide not to act on the bill. If the full committee votes on the bill, it is reported back to the Senate or the House. The Speaker and majority leader usually determine if, when and in what order bills come up. If the bill makes it to the floor of the Senate or House, it is debated, amendments are sometimes added, and the bill is passed or defeated.

When a bill is passed by either the House or Senate, it is referred to the other chamber where it usually takes the same process through a committee on to the whole chamber. If the actions of the other chamber significantly alter the bill, a conference committee is formed to reconcile differences between the House and Senate versions. If the conference committee is unable to reach agreement, the bill dies. If an agreement is reached, a conference report is prepared describing the recommendations for changes. Both the House and Senate must approve the report.

After a bill is approved (with identical language) by the Senate and House, it is sent to the President to approve and sign it into law. If the President does nothing for 10 days, it automatically becomes law. If the President vetoes it, Congress may override the veto by a two-thirds roll call vote of members who are present in sufficient numbers for a quorum.

Many refugee and immigration bills get stuck in the process for a long time and sometimes when other related bills move forward, the language of the refugee/immigration bill gets attached as an amendment to the related bill. Congressional rules say that the attachment must be germane to the content of the bill to which it is being attached, but often the relationship is a long stretch. On many occasions, refugee and immigration bills have been added as amendments to funding bills.

Becoming a National Advocate

The number one thing legislators listen to when making decisions is what their constituents say. That is why your concern for refugees and immigrants needs to be shared with your legislators. It is estimated that only five percent of Americans communicate with their representatives in government, and of those, only one percent communicate on matters that go beyond self-interest to focus on the hurting people of our world. You do not have to be an expert on refugee and immigration issues in order to express your concerns. The conviction behind your words is as persuasive as extensive knowledge of the issue, but the effectiveness of your advocacy can be enhanced by following these tips:

- Brief yourself about your legislator: the general extent of his/her district, committee and sub-committee assignments, number of terms served, professional background, religious background, voting record on refugee and immigration issues, and views stated publicly on refugee and immigration issues.
- Legislative aides have made it clear that the quantity of contact is important. As few as one or two contacts can have an effect if the issue is receiving little publicity. However, issues that are more in the news, as immigration and refugee issues often are, usually require a greater volume of contacts to counter the anti-immigrant sentiment received.
- Focus on your own legislators, even if it is to urge them to urge other legislators to act. Short simple statements from people who reside in the legislator's area are taken much more seriously than statements from people outside the legislator's area. You can best influence a Senator in another state to change their opinion if you can influence your Senator to talk with that other Senator.

- If you call or visit, ask to speak with the aide responsible for refugees and immigration. Legislators assign different aides to different issues. It is more effective to speak with the specific staff person who is assigned to the issue, than to speak with someone who doesn't know much about the issue. However, it is better to speak with someone than to speak with no one, if the appropriate staff person is unavailable. It is important to remember that as you relate to the aide, you are relating to the legislator. The aide is very influential, and oftentimes the aide him/herself makes decisions on how the legislator will vote. In some way, your communication will get to the legislator.
- Be clear about what bill number and title you are referring to, if that is possible. If there is currently no bill on the issue, clearly state at the beginning of the conversation the issue you are addressing.
- Ask for specific action, such as a vote for a bill, or ask that the legislator draft or co-sponsor a bill, if possible. If there is not a specific action to request, ask the legislator to clarify his/her position on the issue and discuss how they can work with immigration advocates to support and introduce legislation to improve circumstances for immigrants and refugees.
- Keep it short (written material should be no more than one page). Begin by stating the issue, your position on the issue, and what action you want your legislator to take on the issue. Easy-to-understand messages are preferable to technical, complex ones. Don't worry about providing all the information or details on the issue. Your legislator is more interested in what you think, than in learning all about the details of the issue.
- Be polite. Even if you disagree with your legislator, you can use your contact to learn what arguments are persuasive to him/her and how you can work together on what you do agree on.
- If you have some authority on the issue (e.g., your church sponsored a refugee or you are a recent immigrant) be sure to note that you write or speak from experience. Personalize the issue by telling the stories of recent refugees and immigrants that have come to your community. Also mention that you speak not only for yourself, but for many of your friends, family members, neighbors, and/or church members.
- If you have an established relationship (e.g., campaign fund contribution), remind your legislator of that relationship.
- Express appreciation for his/her past work (with which you agree). This is not merely a courtesy. It indicates to your legislator that you are a serious constituent who notices how he/she votes.
- Follow up any visit to a legislator's office by writing a thank you e-mail to the staff person you met to thank them for their time. Use that e-mail to again highlight the points you made in the visit.
- Consider following up your contact with your legislator by writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper about immigration and refugee issues and sending a copy to the staff with whom you met. Legislators pay attention to issues raised in the newspapers of their constituents' communities.
- Maintain the relationship by calling the staff person about once a month to ask what the legislator is doing to enact more humane immigration and refugee policies.

If you call:

The U.S. Capitol switchboard number in Washington, D.C. is (202) 224-3121. The White House Comment Line is (202) 456-1111.

If you write:

Security measures prevent hand-written letters from getting to legislators in a timely manner. Because fax machines are constantly in demand in congressional offices, fax is also a less

preferable method of getting your message considered. E-mail is the best option for written communication.

- To address a member of the House of Representatives write to - The Honorable (full name), U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., 20515. Dear Representative (last name):
- To address a member of the Senate write to - The Honorable (full name), United States Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510. Dear Senator (last name):
- To address the President write to - President (full name), 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C., 20500. Dear Mr. President:

Be sure to use the correct spelling of your legislator's name. Include your name and address so you can receive a response, which may come to you as an e-mail or a letter.

If you visit:

Visits can be made either to the local office or the Washington, D.C. office. Locally, seek appointments over recess periods (around every holiday) when your legislator returns to your area. The following are normal congressional recess periods:

- Presidents' Birthday - Congress recesses for approximately one week in February.
- Easter - Congress recesses for two weeks around this holiday.
- Memorial Day - Congress recesses from mid-week before the holiday to mid-week after.
- Fourth of July - Congress recesses from the end of June to a few days after July 4th.
- Labor Day - Congress recesses from mid-August through the first week of September.
- Columbus Day - If Congress is still in session, it recesses from mid-week before the holiday to mid-week after.

If you meet with staff in the local office, be sure to follow up with a call to the Washington D.C. office. Let them know that you are a constituent and that you have met with their local staff, and have a similar conversation with them about what the legislator is doing for immigrants and refugees.

Plans to visit the Washington, D.C. office can often be made through the local office. Otherwise, e-mail or call in advance and then call upon your arrival in D.C. to confirm the previously arranged appointment. Remember that most legislative business occurs Tuesday through Thursday, and that closing days of a session are extra busy. Be aware that the appointment may start late and allow enough time between appointments if you are visiting more than one legislator.

Be on time for the meeting. Begin by explaining who you are and that you are a constituent. For a group visit, decide beforehand on who will be your spokesperson, introduce the group, guide the conversation, and summarize the issues of concern. If a comment is made or question asked which "throws" you, admit you will need some time to think it over or check on the topic. Be sure to follow up with a reply, as soon as possible. At the end of the meeting, thank your legislator or aide for meeting with you. Leave a packet of information about the concern(s) you have raised. Follow up your visit with a message expressing your thanks for the opportunity to meet with your legislator or his/her aide. If your legislator's or aide's plans to meet with you are interrupted by something unexpected happening on Capitol Hill that day and you cannot meet as you had planned, stop by the office anyway to leave the packet of information you had prepared, and follow up with them by phone the following day.

What to tell your legislator about refugees and immigration:

Obviously you will want to speak concretely about any legislation currently under consideration, but the following messages can accompany that effort. In addition, it is often helpful to tell a

story of a refugee or immigrant in the legislator's district/state who has adjusted well and become an asset to the community.

- Immigrants and refugees have made this country what it is today, and they continue to bring a diversity that makes America strong.
- Most immigrants and refugees are admitted legally to be reunited with close family members who are already in the United States, and family reunification is important for the well-being of our nation.
- U.S. society has real problems to face, but blaming immigrants and refugees for the problems is scapegoating and distracts us from devising real solutions to our problems.
- We need an immigration system that treats all people with dignity and respect, prioritizes family unity, protects workers, and provides undocumented immigrants a pathway to lawful residency and eventual earned citizenship.

Government Web sites containing information that may be helpful in advocacy efforts:

- Library of Congress' "Thomas" Legislative Information on the Internet – <http://thomas.loc.gov>;
- Senate – <http://www.senate.gov>;
- House of Representatives – <http://www.house.gov>; and
- White House – <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

Becoming a Community Advocate

More and more refugee and immigration legislation is being introduced into state, county, and city legislative bodies. This is happening, in large part, out of public frustration over the lack of national movement on the issues. The guidelines and information above also generally apply to the kinds of efforts needed at the state, county, and city level on refugee and immigration legislation. You can best stay abreast of what is happening in your community by reading local newspapers and watching nightly news. When you learn of pending legislation, let your views be known, not only to your local legislators, but also to your friends and family who can join you in these efforts.

In addition to advocating with your national, state, county and city legislators, you can advocate on behalf of refugees and immigrants within your own community through:

- The media – by writing letters to the editor of your local newspaper expressing your views about refugee and immigration issues.
- The organizations to which you belong – by expressing your opinions about the contributions that refugees and immigrants make to your community when those issues get discussed in your club, association, or congregation.
- Public meetings – by participating in local hearings and other public gatherings where these issues are discussed.
- A community/congregation dialogue session – by hosting a gathering to discuss refugee and immigration issues and educate those who seek to learn more.

(Updated 2010)