

## DEFINITION OF ADOVCATE...

1. To speak, plead, or argue in favor of
2. One that argues for a cause; a supporter or defender

You don't need special training to be an advocate. Anyone can do it. All that is needed is a passion for DBSA's mission—to improve the lives of people living with mood disorders. Most of what a good advocate does is intuitive and grows out of a few basic principles. This pamphlet is meant to be a guide for you as you advocate for the rights of people with mood disorders.

- DBSA's mission** is to “improve the lives of people living with mood disorders” by:
- Improving recognition, early detection, and diagnosis of mood disorders as treatable medical illnesses
  - Helping people successfully manage their disease
  - Working with people with mood disorders, families and health care professionals to improve care
  - Expanding the ability of people to receive treatment
  - Advancing research to improve mood disorder treatment options
  - Increasing acceptance and understanding of mood disorders so that the rights of people with mood disorders are protected

To find out...

- *Who are my state or federal legislators?*
- *Where do I send my letter?*
- *What should I write in my letter?*

## Log onto

[http://www.DBSAlliance.org/advocacy/Legislative\\_Action\\_Center.html](http://www.DBSAlliance.org/advocacy/Legislative_Action_Center.html)

At the DBSA website choose “Visit Capwiz”

- You can enter your zip code to find out who your representatives in Congress and the state house are.
- You can pull up summaries and status reports of the pending legislation in the U.S. Congress that pertains to mental health.
- You can search the legislative records in your state to see what is being done locally.
- You can get help writing a letter to your legislative representative.
- You can e-mail a letter on the spot.
- You can get a list of media outlets in your area.

My Senators are: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My Representative is: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



Depression and Bipolar  
Support Alliance

# EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

## How to Communicate with Legislators

Depression Bipolar Support Alliance  
730 N Franklin, Suite 501  
Chicago, Illinois 60610  
[www.DBSAlliance.org](http://www.DBSAlliance.org)  
800/826-3632

## BASIC RULES OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

- Clear:** ask for action explicitly, keep jargon at a minimum
- Concise:** no more than a page per letter -or- half an hour per call
- Simple:** one issue per letter, one action request per visit
- Specific:** refer to bills by name and number
- Personal:** stress the local/personal impact
- Courteous:** it is okay to disagree but be respectful, remember you represent others
- Continuous:** follow up, send a thank you, keep up with changes, be vigilant

## WRITING LETTERS AND EMAIL

Public officials pay careful attention to their mail since it gives them the best perspective on how the public feels about pending legislative activity. Often, form letters and petitions are used, but most legislators place little weight on such an approach.

It is not necessary for you to type your letter unless your handwriting is hard to read. Follow the basic rules of good communication (above) to help write your letter. Be sure to include a return address so your legislator knows where to send a response and so that they can see whether you live in their district.

**JUST DO IT!** A simple postcard, a fax, or a handwritten letter—any is a good choice. Something is better than nothing.

## WHAT ARE POLICY MAKERS LIKE?

Legislators...

- ...hold public office to help others.
- ...like to be asked.
- ...are good listeners.
- ...do not know everything.
- ...have many demands on their time.
- ...are always running for office.
- ...respond to crises.
- ...act differently when they're being watched.
- ...like to be thanked.
- ...love good press.

Most often, a visit to your representative's office will take place with a staff person, don't be disappointed. In general, people who hold public office have many demands on their time and not enough resources to accomplish everything they want.

Getting to know your legislator, and establishing a relationship, will help your voice be heard. Here are a few ways to get you noticed.

Invite your legislator to address a meeting.

Invite your legislator to visit a program you administer or participate in.

Recognize your legislator for his work to improve mental health issues with an award.

Attend "town meetings" and other forums sponsored by your legislator.

Volunteer to work on your legislator's campaign.

## PERSONAL VISITS WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

Personal contact is probably the most effective way to advocate for an issue. You can meet with your legislator either in their capitol office or their local district.

- 1st Call to request a meeting, no more than 30 minutes, and explain your purpose.
  - 2nd It is not uncommon to meet with a staff person instead of your legislator, don't be offended.
  - 3rd Plan and practice your presentation, collect supporting materials.
  - 4th Learn about the legislator and their position on mental health issues.
  - 5th Be on time but plan to wait.
  - 6th Announce yourself to the receptionist and present a business card.
  - 7th When meeting with the legislator introduce yourself and tell them a little about DBSA.
  - 8th State the reason for your visit, limit the number of issues to discuss, and refer to bills by name and number.
  - 9th Give the legislator essential information: a review of critical points, the impact of the bill, your recommendation.
  - 10th It is a nice idea to offer a personal story, but keep it short.
  - 11th Be prepared to answer questions.
  - 12th Leave a fact sheet or supporting materials behind.
  - 13th Have a picture taken to use in your chapter newsletters or Website. (Be sure to forward a copy to the legislator as a follow-up)
  - 14th Thank the legislator for his or her time and leave promptly.
  - 15th Immediately after the meeting, record what occurred (who you met with, what was discussed, responses received, and any follow-up needed).
- Finally Write a thank you letter, summarize your point and include any follow-up information.