Tips for Preparing Public Hearing Testimony

Public hearings are an opportunity to voice your opinion through testimony (written or spoken) in a formal setting. For example, the Texas House Ways and Means Committee will offer the public opportunity to present testimony on tax legislation the members consider. The Committee announces, on a calendar and through other means, when specific legislation will be “heard” and discussed to provide the public opportunity to give testimony before the entire Ways and Means Committee. City councils and school boards also offer opportunities for the public to give input at city council and school board meetings.

If you are unable to attend public hearings in person, you can submit written testimony. Doing so is an effective means of educating committee members/decision makers about your issue. However, always ask if testimony provided outside of the scheduled “hearing” will be entered into the public record. This can vary. Written testimony can often be dropped-off during the scheduled “hearing” and will be entered into the public record.

As a general rule, written testimony should be no more than two typed pages, single-spaced. Write clearly and concisely and avoid using jargon. Anticipate that the staffers and legislators who will read your testimony are intelligent and well educated, but will not have professional experience in the prevention field.

Writing your testimony

- Write it out first.
  - Whether you plan to give your testimony vocally or in writing, write it out and give each committee/city council/school board member a copy.
- Identify yourself and explain why the issue is important to you.
  - For example, your testimony might begin: “My name is [Your Name] and I am a member of Texans Standing Tall, the statewide coalition to make alcohol, tobacco and other drugs irrelevant in the lives of youth. As a parent, the issues of smoking and second-hand smoke are extremely important to me.”
- Thank the committee for inviting the public to be a part of process.
- Include a local anecdote, in five sentences or less, demonstrating how the particular action you want them to take will address a prevention issue in your community.
  - For example: “Passing a comprehensive smoke-free law is a CDC best practice and will protect youth and workers from the harmful impact of second-hand smoke at restaurants in my community.”
- Educate the decision makers on your issue.
  - For instance you might say, “Second-hand smoke is known to be a cause of lung cancer, heart disease, low birth weight and other health problems, and second-hand smoke levels in bars are 3.9 to 6.1 times higher than in office worksites.”

Before attending a public meeting:

- Know the logistics.
  - Where is the hearing? Is space limited? What time does it start/end? Where do I park? Will I need to do a lot of walking?
- Know the rules.
  - Do I need to submit my written testimony in advance?
  - Is there a time limit for speaking?
  - Do you need to pre-register with staff to testify?
• Rehearse what you plan to say.
  o Practicing in front of others or a mirror works wonders.
  o Time yourself. If they have a time limit they typically will cut you off if you don’t finish on time. If they have a lot of people speaking, they appreciate brevity.
• Prepare your materials.
  o Prepare a written copy of your testimony and any additional information to leave the committee. Plan ahead to make sure you are bringing the right number, the best information on the issue, AND that you’re not overwhelming them with paperwork. One issue brief or fact sheet and another document or report is more than enough.
  o Bring enough copies for staff as well – especially if you know they are the committee coordinator or the staffer responsible for your particular issue.

Tips for giving your testimony:
• Use your written testimony as a script.
  o Writing out your testimony in advance will help.
• Be polite and courteous!
  o This includes dressing appropriately and thanking the committee for their time.
• Don’t use acronyms and jargon.
  o Using technical and industry specific language will cause confusion.
• Take notes!
  o If a committee member wants more information, write it down so you don’t forget.
  o Deliver the information promised as soon as possible.

After giving your testimony:
• If you mail your written testimony, a few days later call the committee clerk/staffer to make sure that it was received. If you fax or email the testimony, call the same day. Keep a copy for yourself, and please send a copy of your testimony to Texans Standing Tall for our files.