

What you can do ...

TESTIFY AT A PUBLIC HEARING



Testifying at a legislative hearing gives you the opportunity to deliver your message directly to key decision-makers. It will also get your views into the official public record. D.C. City Council hearings are broadcast, as are the hearings of federal Congressional committees and a number of state legislatures. So you will also be communicating your messages to a wider audience of concerned organizations and individuals.

The rules for testifying vary from one legislative body to another. You can find out what the rules are by calling the office of the chairman of the committee that will be holding the hearing. A list of D.C. City Council Chairs and general rules for public participation can be accessed from <http://www.dccouncil.washington.dc.us>. You can also access weekly hearing schedules there.

There are two kinds of testimony—written and oral. Written testimony may be lengthy, but it doesn't have to be. You can often submit written testimony without testifying orally. Oral testimony usually must be very brief (2–3 minutes) and accompanied by written testimony. So it is best to prepare your written testimony first and then cut it down to the bare essentials.

The important thing for both written and oral testimony is to focus on the issue or issues the committee is considering, tell the committee what you believe it should do, and support your position with relevant facts. These may include your personal experience.

The following provides some general guidelines for preparing your testimony.

- **Begin by introducing yourself.** State your full name and your "credentials" for testifying—for example, your occupation, any relevant organization you belong to and/or life experiences that relate to the issues. For written testimony, add a heading at the top of the page that includes all this information, plus the name of the committee, the issue it is considering, and the date.
- **Provide some additional background.** Briefly summarize the relevant aspects of your personal background and/or the activities of organization you are representing. Your purpose here is to help the committee understand that you have first-hand knowledge of the issues.
- **State the issue or issues you will address.** Oral testimony generally should address at most two issues because your time will be very limited. Written testimony can address more, provided they are clearly defined and focused directly on the subject of the hearing. All you need to do, at this point, is provide a framework for what you are going to talk about.
- **State the action you want the committee to take.** It is always very important to let public officials know what you want them to do. In testimony, you will often want to be recommending that the committee propose a particular legislative action—for example, a new program—or that it approve, disapprove, or modify a piece of legislation that has already been proposed. Sometimes you will be recommending that the committee examine the way a program is functioning.
- **Tell the committee why it should act as you recommend.** Focus on the current situation and how the action you recommend will improve it. If possible, use your personal experience to help the committee understand how the issue affects individuals.
- **Strike a positive note, if you can.** Acknowledge positive action the government has already taken. Note improvements, even in programs you are criticizing..

- **Use your best manners.** It is customary to greet the chairman of the committee by name and then the committee as a whole before you launch into your testimony and to thank them at the end for the opportunity to testify. Always speak respectfully, even when you strongly disapprove of the positions that committee members or other stakeholders have taken. You can certainly be critical of government agencies, but avoid disparaging remarks about government officials and the government in general.

You will find samples of testimony in the Advocacy and Social Justice section of the SOME website, http://www.some.org/inv_advocate.html. There is also testimony in the C.A.R.E. (Citizens About Real Empowerment) section, http://www.some.org/inv_adv_care.html.

The SOME Advocacy Team would welcome the opportunity to provide additional advice about testimony on issues related to homeless and low-income people. So please feel free to e-mail us at advocacy@some.org. We would also be very interested in receiving copies of testimony you submit.