

“Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice... If people all over the world would do this, it would change the earth.”

— William Faulkner

MISSOURI RECOVERY NETWORK

The Statewide Voice for Recovery

Tips on Testifying Before a Legislative Committee

In order to become law, every bill in Missouri must have a public hearing before a legislative committee, be publicly voted upon by the committee, and then come before the full House or Senate for still another vote. The process is then repeated in the second chamber. If both chambers pass the bill in the same form, it is then sent to the Governor to be either signed into law or vetoed. Your opportunity to testify on a bill comes at the committee hearing. Anyone can testify; you do not need formal training. However, in order to be effective you should prepare your testimony beforehand. The following information will help ensure you are prepared when you travel to Jefferson City to testify.

What to Expect at a Hearing

Be present at the beginning of the hearing. The committee chair will open the hearing on a particular bill by announcing the bill number. Opening comments will be made by the bill's sponsor and committee members will have an opportunity to ask questions of the sponsor(s). The chair will then ask for testimony from proponents and opponents.

Expect that there will be a wait. It is a good idea to listen to the testimony of the people before you, especially that of the state agency representatives. They can give the latest information on the legislation, and it is important to know their position on the legislation. It is also important to be able to refute the other side's argument.

Preparing for Your Testimony

- Know the location of the building, the meeting room, and the meeting time.
- Agendas will be posted outside the hearing room. Check to make sure the bill you are interested in has not been removed from the agenda. The bills may not be heard in the printed order.
- When you arrive at the hearing, complete the witness registration form and turn it into the Chair's staff. Be aware that witnesses are not necessarily called in chronological order.
- Additionally, provide copies of your testimony to the Chair's Legislative Assistant or Committee Staff. You should have enough copies for every member of the committee, as well as 3-5 extra copies for staff.
- Double-space your written testimony, and type on only one side of the paper for easy reading. Like other legislative handouts, you should limit your written testimony to one or two pages.

Know Your Audience

- The members of the committee appreciate that you have taken time out of your day to come and testify.
- Be respectful.
- While in the hearing, avoid any clapping, cheering, booing, or other demonstrations.

Know the Issue

- Be prepared for questions and comments from committee members. These are designed to gain additional information, but don't respond if you are not sure of the answer. Tell the members you will send a written answer to the committee, and then follow through. All follow-up answers can be submitted directly to the Chair's staff. They will distribute the information to the committee members.
- Draw from your own knowledge and experience, but be prepared to support your personal opinions with a cogent list of facts.
- Be knowledgeable of your opponent's arguments in case you are asked for a comparison.
- Be aware that sometimes the sponsor of a bill will offer amendments or substitutes when he/she presents the bill to the committee. These proposed amendments or substitutes may change the way you feel about the bill, and, thus, affect your testimony.
- Use your waiting time productively. As questions are being directed to witnesses ahead of you, think how you would have handled that question because you may get the same one. If a question isn't answered fully or correctly you may want to raise the question yourself and offer a different or more complete answer.

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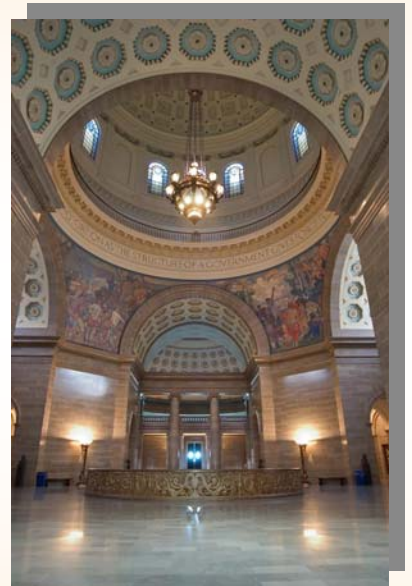
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Presenting Your Testimony

- Begin your presentation by addressing the chairperson first, then members of the committee: "Chairman (Chairwoman), Members of the committee..."
- For the record, state your name and the organization or group you represent. You may also want to announce the region of the state you reside in
- Identify the bill by name and number.
- State whether you support or oppose the legislative measure being heard and briefly explain.
- Summarize your recommendation first and then add your explanation.
- Restate your position at the end.
- Time is usually limited to 3 to 5 minutes, so be brief and direct. Do not read your written testimony to the committee word for word. Committee members will have this information in front of them and will be able to refer to it at a later time. Writing your comments in outline form will be helpful when you speak, and you should summarize your written testimony. Maximize your time before the committee by only presenting the most pertinent information.
- Keep in mind you may have a ten minute version of your testimony — be prepared to summarize it in one minute — that may be all the time you are allowed.
- Avoid being too technical. Avoid using acronyms or technical references unless you first explain what they mean.
- Present facts as facts and opinions as opinions. It is important to clearly label your opinions as such.
- Avoid duplication. If other people will be offering similar testimony at the hearing, try to coordinate your testimony to avoid duplication. Well-organized testimony is the most effective.
- Thank the committee members and offer to answer any questions: "Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions."
- Speak to the question. Respond in a simple and straightforward way. If you don't understand a question, ask the legislator to repeat it or ask for clarification.
- If you disagree with previous testimony, don't attack the person or say he/she is lying. Instead, give your version. If asked about discrepancies, explain why your point of view is more accurate to discredit the earlier information, not the person.
- When a member asks you a question respond: "Chairman (Chairwoman), Senator/Representative (state name), the answer to your question is..."
- If you are not certain of their name, simply refer to them as "Senator" or "Representative."
- Don't respond to inappropriate comments. Let them sink from their own weight. If one member of the committee is rude, just let it pass. Other members will write it off and may even give you compensating sympathy or support.
- Relax! The members understand that this can be an intimidating experience — they don't expect a perfect presentation.



After the Hearing

- Some committees vote right after a hearing. Others wait until the end of the meeting. Some postpone voting until another meeting.
- All committee action is public, so you can stay to listen to committee debate and its vote, even though the public comment portion of the hearing is over.
- You can follow-up with the committee chair's staff to find out how the committee voted on your bill.
- You can also follow-up by sending personalized notes to each committee member, summarizing your testimony and thanking them for the opportunity to testify.