

Checklist: How Elected Officials Can Help

Your elected officials may be able to help you if you need assistance dealing with a federal, state, or local agency, such as if you can't get a timely answer, or if you feel you have been treated unfairly. Most elected officials have staff who are dedicated to helping the people who live in their geographic district (aka constituents). This checklist provides tips for getting help from elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels.

□ Which one of my elected officials should I contact?

The first step is to figure out which of your elected officials can help.

- **Federal Level: Members of Congress (United States Senators and Representatives):** Do you have an issue with a federal agency, program, or service? Examples of federal agencies, programs, and services include Medicare, TRICARE, VA Health, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Social Security, passports, federal student loans, and immigration.
 - If yes, your members of Congress may be able to help.
 - Each state has two U.S. Senators who represent all individuals who live in their state.
 - The state is also divided up into geographic districts represented by a single U.S. Congressperson. The number of districts in each state varies based on the population of their state.
 - Members of Congress have offices in Washington, DC, which are mainly focused on legislative and policy work. They also have offices in the state or district. These district staff are more focused on direct constituent services. For issues with federal agencies, programs, or services, you should reach out to district staff for help.
- **State Level: Governor & Members of State Legislatures (e.g., Senators, Representatives, Assemblymembers):** Do you have an issue with a state agency, program, or service? Examples of state agencies, programs, and services include benefits administered by the state, such as Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Unemployment, State Disability Insurance, Paid Family Leave, and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).
 - If yes, your state elected officials may be able to help.
 - Governors' offices assist individuals who live anywhere in their state.
 - All states have members of state legislatures who represent those who live within their districts.
- **Local Level: County Supervisors, Mayor, City/Town Council, School Board:** Do you have an issue with a local agency, program, or service? Examples of local agencies, programs, and services include community health programs, local financial assistance programs, emergency planning and shelters, and schools.
 - If yes, your local officials can help.
 - Mayors serve everyone living in the city.
 - County supervisors, city/town councils, and school boards are made up of representatives from local districts. Those elected serve individuals who live in their district.

□ **How do I find my elected officials?**

- Once you decide which elected official can best help you with your situation, you can find their contact information online. For example, Common Cause is a non-partisan organization that provides information about elected officials at all levels of government: www.commoncause.org.

□ **What is the best way to communicate with elected officials?**

- Most elected officials have websites that provide the preferred options for contacting them, including phone numbers, online submission forms, mailing addresses, fax, email, social media handles, and their office location for in-person meetings or activities. However, it is typically best to call ahead for an appointment before arriving in-person at their office.

□ **What are some effective tips for communicating with an elected official?**

- Use the methods of communication preferred by your elected official.
- Use the proper title of your elected official when addressing them (e.g., Senator, Representative, Mayor).
- If calling, identify yourself as a constituent (a voter that they represent) and be prepared to provide your mailing address. Let the person on the phone know you are seeking help from a constituent services staff member.
- Be as brief as possible, limiting letters and emails to no more than 2 pages.
 - Use the first sentence or paragraph to identify yourself as a constituent and describe the reason you are writing. Include a clear request for help from your elected official. If you have an idea how you would like them to help, be specific.
 - Include all relevant information and claim numbers in your letter, such as:
 - Your Social Security number for an issue involving Social Security;
 - VA claim number for a case with Department of Veterans Affairs;
 - Business taxpayer ID number (Social Security number, if an individual) for an IRS issue;
 - Your address, home phone number, and daytime phone number (if different than home) so that they can follow up with you; and
 - Copies of any documents or correspondence that you may have from the agency involved.
- Be prepared to sign a written authorization, as is required by the Privacy Act of 1974, before Members of Congress or their staff can get information about your case. These forms can typically be found on each member's website.

□ **What elected officials can't help with?**

- Issues with other levels of government (e.g., a state senator may not be helpful with IRS issues)
- Issues with any court of law (including appeal proceedings) since these are activities of the judicial branch of government. If you are having a legal problem involving the courts, you may need to consider help from an attorney. Visit TriageCancer.org/Cancer-Finances-Legal-Assistance for information on how to find an attorney.

**For more information about engaging with elected officials, please visit
TriageCancer.org/Advocacy.**