



Florida Learn & Serve Student Guide to Engaging Elected Officials

Adapted from Global Youth Service Day Student Guide

It is important to cultivate champions for service-learning, especially among government officials and other policy-makers. One of the best ways to secure their support is to get them personally involved in great service projects. When an elected or agency official supports your event, you will often benefit from increased media attention, greater public awareness about your event, and heightened long-run governmental support for your organization and program.

Involving government officials in your project can also be a great learning experience for young people. By researching who their government officials are, youth learn about the political process. By contacting them, they have the opportunity to practice writing professional communication. By engaging government officials in a long-term strategy, they learn about civic engagement, advocacy, building professional relationships, and how government can work together with groups and citizens to solve problems.

Contacting government officials can be intimidating because they are leaders with busy schedules, but it doesn't have to be. Keep in mind that government officials are there to serve their constituents, and you are their constituent. Most officials will welcome the opportunity to support community leaders and young people who are doing something positive for the community. This guide provides tips on the following subjects:

- Contacting Legislators for the “Raise Your Voices for Service Learning” Conference to arrange appointments – PAGE 2
- Tips to remember when contacting/engaging government officials – PAGE 4
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ENGAGING ELECTED OFFICIALS IN THE “RAISE YOUR VOICES FOR SERVICE-LEARNING” CONFERENCE (RYVSL)

**Florida State Capitol Building
Tallahassee, FL
April 21 – 22, 2008**

HOW FLORIDA LEARN & SERVE CAN HELP

For youth to reach out to their elected officials, we provide online tools for you to identify and invite officials at the local, state, and federal level so those officials learn about your efforts and hear from their constituent – YOU! We need you to provide specific details about your plans to us so we can highlight your service project in our outreach to members of Congress, the Administration, and governors. Please email us information about your events at mmatthews@admin.fsu.edu to ensure your inclusion in our government relations outreach. By working together, we hope to have as many officials as possible participate in some way at the “Raise Your Voices for Service-Learning Conference.”

CONTACTING FL SENATORS OR REPRESENTATIVES

Our recommendation is to begin by emailing a letter of invitation to your representative or senator’s office in Tallahassee. If you want to mail a letter, send it to the nearest district office within your state. You can find this information by visiting www.flsenate.gov and entering your ZIP code or by searching on www.servenet.org (click on the advocacy tab). After you have emailed your elected official you should follow-up with personal calls for scheduling your visits. Personal calls are critical to the process but it is helpful for the legislative aides to have the invitation for reference.

It is also helpful to call the legislator’s office and ask for the name and fax number of the scheduler. The scheduler will almost always require a faxed invitation with event details before confirming the legislator’s attendance. In an effort to ensure that your letter is as effective as possible, we’ve provided a draft letter that can be tailored to your specific project. Below are a few helpful hints.

When addressing correspondence, the following model is appropriate:

The Honorable (full name)

Address

City, State, ZIP Code +4

Dear Senator (or Representative) (Last Name):

Regardless of how you send your letter (whether by mail, fax, or e-mail) be sure to include your name and address, including city, state, and ZIP code + 4. Your purpose for writing should be stated in the first paragraph. For example, “I am writing on behalf of the (name of your school or project) to meet with us during the Raise Your Voices for Service-Learning Conference (RYVSL).”

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Additional tips for communicating with your legislators:

- Describe your service-learning project including the date(s) and times, specific location, the number of youth and adults involved, how it serves the community, etc.
- This information is similar to the media press releases that you may have already completed. Be as specific as possible about your project and when you will be available to meet with them during the conference (April 22nd).
- Also include if there is a specific timeframe that they would need to be there or if you're flexible and able to accommodate their schedule. The day of April 22nd has been set aside for you to meet with your legislators. Be sure to let them know that you will be available for the entire day until 2 pm for visits.
- As always, you'll want to be courteous, to the point and, if possible, keep the communications to one page (even if you're sending it by email).
- Make sure to thank them for considering your invitation, and provide them a contact name and phone number for additional information.
- A few days after you send your written invitation (email), follow up with the office by a phone call to make sure they received your correspondence and to respond to any questions.
- You may want to encourage the office to let you know whether or not the representative or senator can meet with you by a certain date (April 1st) so you can plan accordingly.
- Be sure to explain that the legislator is welcome at the RYVSL event in the Capitol Courtyard if his or her schedule changes at the last minute!
- If you are unable to schedule a visit with your legislator please plan to bring materials about your project when you come to the Capitol. In your phone communications with the legislator, let them know that you will be providing them with materials (products, brochures, fact sheets, etc.) when you drop by and will either leave them in their mail-box or (this is better) give them directly to an aide. Student developed artifact and products are great ways to show the story of your project (mentoring/reading-coaching books, quilts, art-work, etc.) so be sure to include these if possible. If you have files in electronic format or posted on your service-learning project or school website be sure to send those along to the aide as links or attachments.

For the RYVSL Conference we are primarily focusing on the meetings with the Florida Senators and Representatives. However, this information is easily adapted and can be used in your communications with other government officials from your state including the governor, mayor, city council members, school board members, etc for your future outreach efforts As you learn which government officials are planning to participate in your events, please let Florida Learn & Serve know so we can track those officials who are supporting youth and youth service in their communities and to thank them for their participation. If you have any questions or have problems finding the contact information for your senator or representative, please contact us and we will be happy to assist you.

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TIPS TO REMEMBER WHEN CONTACTING/ENGAGING GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

- Invite them early! Most officials have very busy schedules so make sure to start early and follow up until they let you know if they can or cannot attend.
- Provide them with a variety of ways to get involved at the local level (attending local service-learning events, speaking at celebrations) if they are unable to meet with you.
- Make sure to have date, time, location, and specific activity information available before you make contact with their staff.
- Most officials can't make a commitment to attend an event without knowing all the details.
- Follow up!
- Make sure to follow up with their staff until you receive a confirmation of their attendance or a decline. If their staff tells you that the official is too busy to attend your event, be prepared to let them know about other ways that he/she can show their support of your efforts and be prepared to mail materials to them and/or bring materials with you when you visit the Capitol.

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GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS: WHO THEY ARE AND HOW TO CONTACT THEM

Government officials are those individuals who have gone through a public election process, and who are selected by registered voters, for a specific term. Agency officials include heads of local, state, and federal agencies or administrative units of government. They also serve for a specific term, but are selected for their position by an elected official to implement policies and assist in running the government. For example, your state's governor is an elected official, but if you're doing a service-learning project, you should also consider inviting a member of your State or local board of education, as they are government officials as well. All U.S. Cabinet officials (such as the Secretary of Defense) are appointed by the President of the United States, and must be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. If you're doing an environmental project, you could invite the director of your State Department of Environmental Quality, who is usually appointed by the governor.

Below are examples of government officials at the local, state, and national level:

National

Members of Congress
(U.S. Representatives and U.S. Senators)

State

- State Senators and Representatives
- Governor
- Secretary of State
- Attorney General
- Secretary
- Treasurer

City/County

- Mayor/Supervisor
- City Council/County Board members
- School Board members
- City/County Manager
- Police Chief/Sheriff
- City/County Clerk

Agency officials include directors of the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Youth Services, the Department of Aging, etc. To identify and contact government officials, please visit www.servenet.org and click on the advocacy tab. Or go directly to the Youth Policy Action Center website at the following web site:

<http://www.youthpolicyactioncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=577&parentID=576&nodeID=5>

To find legislators in Florida go to www.flsenate.gov and enter your ZIP code.

There, you can find out how to contact government officials and send personalized invitations to all of them. You can also take action on various issues highlighted in the Alerts section. Use the worksheet in this chapter to help you plan your outreach to government officials and track your success.



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ENGAGING ELECTED & AGENCY OFFICIALS IN YOUR SERVICE PROJECT

Before you contact officials, you should decide how you would like them to be involved in your event. The more specific a request you make, the more likely the official is to accept. Also, having multiple options for the official to consider makes it more likely that you will receive his or her support in some way. In addition to attending your project, remember that officials have considerable influence and communications channels at their disposal that they can use to spread the word about your event. Here are some things you can ask officials to do:

1. Volunteer at your service-learning project, leading youth by example.
2. Address volunteers at the kick-off rally or closing celebration.
3. Proclaim April 2008 to be Service-Learning month in your state or city
4. Distribute a press release or a public service announcement highlighting your service-learning project and other service-learning activities taking place in your city or state.
5. Write an op-ed or letter to the editor encouraging youth participation in service-learning events and year-round service.
6. Invite your state's congressional delegation, legislators, mayors and local government officials, judges and their staff to participate in and/or organize activities related to service-learning events.
7. Hold a recognition ceremony at City Hall or the State Capitol for participants after a service-learning event.
8. Ask the mayor, city managers, and/or town/county executives to issue a proclamation recognizing Service-Learning day in cities across your state.
9. Create state or local Youth Advisory Councils. Young people have earned a place at the decision-making table. With a tremendous amount of energy, commitment, and creativity, it is only fitting that youth in America play a lead role in addressing the needs of their peers and community. Youth Advisory Councils can build on the positive impact of Service-Learning throughout the entire year.
10. Ask youth to assess your community's needs that can be addressed through youth service, and present a service plan to your city council, session of state legislature, etc.

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ELECTED OFFICIALS STUDENT WORKSHEET

ELECTED OFFICIAL	ROLE REQUESTED (Speaker, issue proclamation, volunteer, etc.)	PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR CONTACTING	DATE OF CONTACT	LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION (APPOINTMENT, ACTION)	NOTIFIED FL&S IF PARTICIPATING	SENT THANK YOU
Governor:						
State Senator (s)						
Representative (s)						
Mayor/Supervisor						
Other State Officials						
Other Local Officials (School Board Members)						

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TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE MESSAGES

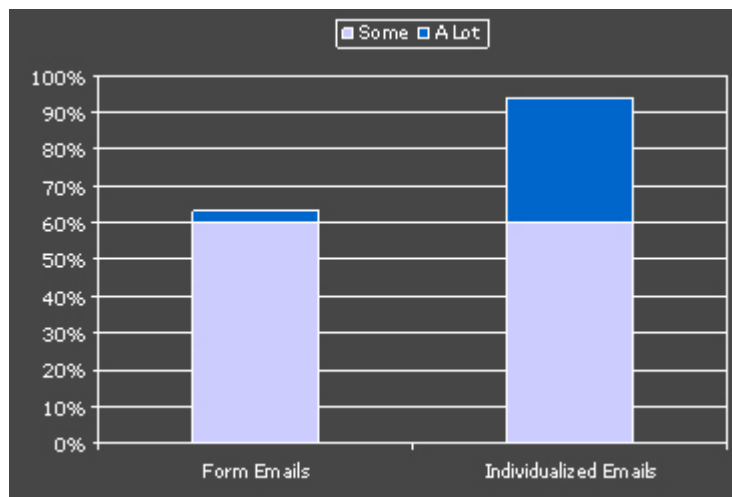
SOURCE: <http://www.youthpolicyactioncenter.org/>

TIP #1: PERSONALIZED MESSAGES ARE 10 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO HAVE A LOT OF INFLUENCE

Don't just cut and paste the message points -- take an extra 30 seconds to let them know why service-learning and youth issues are important to you in particular!

Senior congressional staff were asked:

If your Member/Senator has not already arrived at a firm decision on an issues, how much influence might the following advocacy strategies directed to the Washington office have on his/her decision?



Source: Congressional Management Foundation. Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy.

EXAMPLE: "My name is [John Doe] and I'm a [student; parent; grandparent; teacher; youth worker; business owner; etc]. Child and youth issues are important to me because [I see my friends struggle; I am doing the best I can and wish more people would help; we need to invest in the future; etc.]"

TIP #2: KEEP MESSAGES SHORT

Congressional staff are very busy!

TIP #3: TELL THEM SOMETHING NEW

Let them know how this impacts you and their district in particular.

EXAMPLE: "It is important for you to understand how this affects your district. [I can't find anything fun and safe to do after school; Two schools have closed in your district this year; the crime rate has gone up; there is a great service-learning program but it needs more support; etc.]"

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