

Contacting Elected Officials

A HOPE STREET COALITION RESOURCE

Effective Advocacy on Homelessness, Mental Illness, and Addiction

Homelessness is one of the top issues at all levels of government. It's crucial to make your voice heard to advocate for positive change.

Contacting your councilmember, regional or county supervisor, state legislator, and Member of Congress is easy once you know how.



Let's break it down and focus on how to be effective:

1) Changing public policy is better described as a marathon than a sprint, so don't get discouraged. Your letter or email will probably not elicit much change at first but considered as the first installment in developing a relationship with your elected official. This might seem daunting, but keep in mind your passion for ending the suffering on the streets and improving the humanitarian crisis unfolding in our communities.

**If not now,
when?
If not you, who?**
Hillel, the Elder

2) Elected officials often divide up the various issues they are responsible for addressing. Most legislative offices have a housing / homelessness staff person in the office you are contacting. The office may have a different person who deals with mental illness and addiction. That's okay. One of the objectives is to get these staffers talking about how these issues are so inextricably linked.

3) What do you want to say? Is it a recommendation, a complaint, a position on a specific ordinance or legislative proposal, or just to inform them about an important aspect of homelessness, mental illness, and addiction? Because legislators get so many letters and emails from their constituents, their immediate questions are: "What does this person want me to do for them and why should I do it?" Therefore, your letter should be direct, to the point, and brief. Identify the bill you want them to support or oppose or the exact regulation you think should be reformed.

4) Support your point with good reasoning and statistics. Don't overdo it with a fully footnoted letter or report. Remember, these are very busy people who appreciate brevity. The support is only included as a foundation to get what you want. For example, you may be writing to encourage the development of more residential treatment and care facilities for the unhoused mentally ill and addicted. Citing a study that shows the majority of the unsheltered homeless experience mental health conditions educates your audience and supports the recommended action.

5) Thank them and be respectful. If you expect them to take your issue seriously refrain from criticizing them or denigrating their past actions or statements. Keep politics out of the conversation if possible. Include personal stories only if they are short and relevant to the action your requested action.

6) Follow up. Remember this is a marathon not a sprint. Therefore, follow up with an email or a call. Your goal is to build a relationship with the staff member-contact that can lead to an in-person meeting, if possible. In no time at all you may become a trusted advisor and get inside information on our targeted issue. Just like any relationship, it takes time.

Letter Outline

Paragraph 1

State why you are contacting them in two to three sentences. Tell them right up front what you want them to do for you. **"I am contacting you to encourage your support for the creation of residential treatment facilities for the unhoused mentally ill and addicted."** You will want to cite a specific bill, resolution, regulation, or action in this paragraph. **"H.R. 1234,**

The More Funding for Treatment Act, provides funding for various types of residential treatment, including treatment facilities."

Paragraph 2

Explain the problem as succinctly as possible. This usually takes four or five sentences. **"More residential treatment facilities are urgently needed because, without these facilities, the most vulnerable do not receive treatment and often end up unhoused on the streets.** This is a good place to include a statistic. **"A UCLA study in 2019 demonstrated that 78% of the people experiencing unsheltered homelessness had a mental illness condition."** You can add a personal insight but be succinct. **"In my work with the homeless outreach team, we often encounter individuals experiencing mental illness and drug addiction together and have very few resources to help them gain long-term stability and improve their conditions."**

Paragraph 3

Request specific action. **"Because of the significant increase in unsheltered homelessness in Anytown, I request your support for residential treatment facilities as a part of your support for H.R. 1234."** Offer to provide additional resources or talk further about this issue.

The changes for which we advocate are simple, but the solutions are complex. That is why it's important to rely on **Hope Street Coalition** for information and resources to effectively advocate. Contact **Hope Street** with a specific question so that we can direct resources to equip you in your advocacy. info@hopestreetcoalition.org

"What does this person want me to do for them and why should I do it?"

Sample Letter

April 24, 2021

The Honorable (First Name) (Last Name)
(Room Number), State Capitol
Sacramento, CA (Zip Code)

Re: (State the topic or the bill number, author and subject if you are writing to support or oppose a particular legislative bill)

Dear (Assembly Member/Senator) (Last Name):

I am contacting you to encourage your support for the creation of residential treatment facilities for the unhoused mentally ill and addicted. (If you live in their district add that information.) H.R. 1234, the More Funding for Treatment Act, provides funding for various types of residential treatment, including treatment facilities.

(State why you support or oppose the bill or other issue here. Choose up to three of the strongest points that support your position. Include a brief personal story, if applicable, on why this issue is important to you.) More residential treatment facilities are urgently needed because, without these facilities, the most vulnerable do not receive treatment and often end up unhoused on the streets. A UCLA study in 2019 demonstrated that 78% of the people experiencing unsheltered homelessness had a mental illness condition. In my work with the homeless outreach team, we often encounter individuals experiencing mental illness and drug addiction together and have very few resources to help them gain long-term stability and improve their conditions.

(Tell your representative how you want them to vote on this issue and ask for a response. Be sure to include your name and address on both your email, letter and envelope, if applicable. Include your contact phone number.) Because of the significant increase in unsheltered homelessness in (your town), I request your support for residential treatment facilities as part of your support for H.R. 1234. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

SIGN YOUR NAME

Print your name and title
Street Address
City, State and Zip Code
Email address
LinkedIn link, if applicable