Tips for Communicating with Elected Officials

1. Don’t forget to introduce yourself (include your NAMI affiliate).

2. Use the legislator’s official title. For example: “Representative Taylor” or “Senator Risser.”

3. Share your personal story if you feel comfortable doing so, but remember:
   • Be brief! Too much detail will overwhelm them.
   • Motivate with hope and recovery whenever possible. Of course, not everything is sunshine and roses, or we wouldn’t be contacting them! But recovery is real, common and not discussed enough.
   • Give a clear message and practice saying it. Write it out if that helps you.

4. Know basic information about the issues you are advocating for. You do not need to be an expert, just have a very general understanding. You do not need to have all the answers. If you are meeting in-person, it is good to ask questions and listen, rather than talking throughout the whole meeting.

5. Keep in mind that your story is always right and your experiences have value and meaning.

6. If your legislator or staffer asks a question that you don’t know the answer to, simply tell them: “I’m not sure, but I can find out and follow up with you.” Then be sure to follow up! If you need support following up, contact NAMI Wisconsin.

7. If your legislator or staffer raises objections about an issue you support, or vice versa, stay calm and polite. Thank them for sharing their viewpoint. If you don’t have a response, tell them you will get back to them.

8. If your legislator sends a staffer to meet with you instead, treat them with the same respect and attention that you would give the legislator. Staffers do much of the leg work associated with moving our issues forward and building relationships with them is VERY valuable.

9. Make a clear “ask.” For example: “I would urge you to support more funding for ________.” or “I would ask you to support removing ______ item from the budget.”

10. It is okay if you don’t get any commitments from them. This gives you a reason to reach out to them again.

11. Don’t give up. Keep up the contacts and build a relationship. Just as with any other relationship, you can’t expect to gain trust and understanding with one interaction.

12. It is normal to feel uncomfortable or intimidated. The vast majority of people never even reach out to their elected officials. You should feel proud for making the effort. Even though your elected officials have fancy titles and power, they are regular people.

13. Remember to thank them for their time and/or support.