



Things to Think About!



By Brandan Atkin

Recommended Reading:

<http://www.lacanadvocates.org>

Click on Legislative Activities and read the following sections:

[Helpful Information for Effective Advocacy](#)

[Outline of a Sample Letter to Policymakers](#)

[How to Testify at a Public Hearing](#)

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How to Testify at a Public Hearing Or

Mrs. Jorgensen Goes to State Capitol Hill By Linda Jorgensen

Editor's Note: A special Thank You needs to go to Mr. Shawn Fleming, Deputy Director of the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council and Louisiana Citizens for Action Now (LaCAN) for the invaluable information, assistance and permission to, "Use whatever you need." It is greatly appreciated. The format is theirs, text with additions is a combination of theirs and mine and any mistakes are my own.

Early in January this year I was given the opportunity to testify before my state's Social Services Appropriations Subcommittee. The topic was "suggestions where reductions/savings/efficiencies could be realized within Utah's Department of Services for People with Disabilities system." Some of our more recent family experiences with this department have been glaring examples of ways savings and reductions could be made. I felt we could easily address the topic. The problem came in knowing how to go about testifying?

I immediately went to my favorite legislative resource, the Louisiana Citizens for Action Now (LaCAN) website. I used the LaCAN "How-To" as a basis to prepare my remarks, tweaking them to fit the requirements of Utah State Legislative protocol. The resulting outline is a combination of protocols for both states. It worked well.

How to Testify at a Public Hearing: A Guide for Self Advocates and Family Members

What do I say at a public hearing?

The first step is to identify the specific topic being discussed at the hearing. Prepare what you would like to say regarding the chosen topic in advance, put it in easy to read writing and then practice saying your remarks out loud. Keep your remarks short and to the point. Practice making your point within the time frame allotted to you. Some committees may use a timer to assist individuals in keeping to the time allotted. This allows others that follow time to make their remarks as well.

Prepare any supporting pictures or documentation before you get there. Ensure you have a copy for each member of the committee. If you are testifying on behalf of a family member and they are unable to attend with you bring an 8"x10" photograph of your family member to ensure all members can see who you are referring to.

Bring what you want to say in writing to the Public Hearing. Be sure to include your name, if you or a family member has a disability and what support services you have or if

you are waiting for support services. Tell your story. Stories are powerful. Include why this issue is a concern for you and how it affects your life. Remember to ask for something. Can you suggest what they can do to help fix the problem/concern you are addressing? Be polite, respectful and reasonable.

Not sure what to say? In Louisiana ask for help from your regional LaCAN Leader. Live in another state? Contact an Advocate at your local Family Voices or Advocacy office.

What if I get nervous?

Practice reading what you want to say (your statement) in front of your family, friends or direct support staff. Remember, your story is very important and people want to hear you speak. Practice making eye contact with your audience while you are speaking, if you can.

What do you do when I get to the Public Hearing?

States handle the testimony order in various ways. If your state requires individuals sign up before the hearing check to see if your name is on the Hearing Roster when you arrive. If for some reason your name has been left off the list check with one of the Legislative assistants.

Many states have a sign up sheet at the time of the hearing. Be sure to write your name on the sign in sheet when you arrive. Need help? Just ask. There will be a lot of people happy to help.

Now what?

Take a seat and wait. Generally, if your committee is using a roster, you'll be able to follow the list and will know when it is your turn. Many committees will ask individuals to "please be on deck", or standing to the side and ready to testify as soon as the individual before you has completed their remarks.

If a sign in sheet is being used there will generally be someone in charge who will call your name when it is your turn to tell your story (testify).

What do I say?

Relax. Read what you have written (your statement) and you won't forget anything important. Try to make eye contact

if you can. Remember your story is very important!

Am I done?

If at all possible stay after you have testified. Support all the other people who are sharing their stories. Often legislators may have questions they were not able to directly address in the hearing itself and will seek you out for clarification afterwards, if need be. You may also meet individuals with similar interests and problems that you can speak with. Remember there is strength in numbers and people need to know that others think their story is important.

Once I figured out what I needed to say my next problem came in keeping to the time allotted. My initial statement was 11 minutes long. I needed to shorten it up. Re-working the wording and practicing before my husband, who acted as my official time keeper, I was able to get my statement down to approximately 4 minutes.

Next I needed to practice. I practiced in front of the mirror, under my breath while standing in line at the grocers, and in front of family members at home. I also took some time to prepare a handout (pictures and SHORT informative text) for each committee member supporting what I was going to be talking about. By the time the day arrived I had my remarks pretty much memorized. This was a good thing because once I arrived at the House Building and found the Hearing Room I was told I had 3 minutes in which to make my remarks!

My first thought was panic! At that moment my husband, who had come with me, gave some great on-the-spot advice. "Sit up straight, keep your notes in front of you, smile, look them in the eye and tell them what you practiced. You'll be fine." And that's exactly what I did. I went exactly 15 seconds over my allotted time but I got it done.

Once I left the room (it was standing room only so my daughter and I moved out into the adjacent lobby) I was surprised by a tap on the shoulder. One of the committee members had gotten up and followed me out of the room! He had questions and wanted to be sure we could communicate at a later time. Pictures are worth a thousand words and comments that are short and to the point, make the point.

Since early January many of the committee members across the state have made the effort to directly visit with constituents in small community meetings in order to obtain direct input from DSPD consumers.

We're still working on the problems I had testified about and that's ok. Our legislators are working on them, too.