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A Guide for Personal Testimony: The Art of Using Your Personal Experiences to Influence Policy Decisions

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A Guide for Personal Testimony: The Art of Using Your Personal Experiences to Influence Policy Decisions

The quality of life in any community is determined to some extent by the laws and policies of governmental units and agencies. One way of changing community conditions is to change the laws and policies. From a group's perspective, any proposed change may be for the better or the worse. However, for changes in laws, regulations, or policies to occur, a public hearing is often required. During public hearings, people have an equal opportunity speak either for or against proposed changes.

Many different types of testimony can be and usually are provided during public hearings. These may range from detailed, expert testimony using facts and figures to brief, personal testimony using personal experiences. Each type of testimony has great importance, because public officials often judge the importance of an issue by the number and type of comments they hear.

The purpose of brief, personal testimony is to help those making the decision understand the issues in human or personal terms. As someone interested in giving personal testimony, your task is to tell a story about the changes being considered: to tell what they mean to you. This is not an easy task. It is never easy to talk about important things in limited time, and the issues may be very emotional ones.

This testimony guide is designed to help you prepare your testimony and to teach you how to present it successfully.

Instructions

First, write your answer to these three questions..

1. To whom will you be speaking when you give this testimony?
2. What is the rule, policy, law, or regulation this group might make or change?
3. Why is it important to you?

Second, read the following example of a successful testimony. Note the kind of statements made. Imagine yourself there. Ask yourself,

what were the most important things this person said?

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Next, use the guide for preparing personal testimony to write the comments you want to make.

Read your comments to make sure you said everything you want to say. Time how long it takes you to read your testimony. If it takes more than three minutes, make it shorter by cutting out some comments. Two minutes is excellent.

Finally, memorize your comments if you have time. Using notes to read testimony can distract you and your listeners from what you have to say. In addition, you are less likely to forget an important point you want to make. Memorizing your testimony is especially important when testimony is limited to one appearance scheduled in advance. In this case, you can't go back to make a point you missed.

An Example of Successful Testimony

Scene: a public hearing concerning a change in educational policy that would reduce the requirement for public schools to provide equal education to all student. A woman took the floor. There was a moment of silence as she looked at the panel of officials who were charged with the decision.

She said, "My name is Barbara Krieder. It may not look like it to you, but I'm disabled. I have a learning disability. I can't read. When I was a child, my disability was not diagnosed, and I didn't get the special kind of help from my teacher that could have helped me learn how to read. Now I can't go to a restaurant alone, because I'm too embarrassed to tell the waitress I can't read the menu. I can't drive, because I can't read the signs on the road. I can't even read stories to my own children. I'm not stupid. I just never learned how to read."

She paused for a moment. "Now, whatever you do won't change things for me. It's too late for me. But it's not too late for these young kids. If you

change the law, the way I hear it, the kids whose lives were looking brighter than mine will end up suffering the same as I did. Teachers won't know that they have a disability. They'll push the kids too hard, or in the wrong way, or, most likely they will give up on them like they gave up on me. Those kids will just turn into shadows. So, what do you tell a kid like me? Where's the justice in it? What kind of progress have we made when kids like me still can't learn to read?"

She stopped and looked at each member of the panel. Then she returned to her seat.

Testimony Preparation Guide

Now, take the time to prepare your own testimony following the general testimony activities seen in the two examples below. Use the blank spaces to write what you want to say in your testimony.

1. Go to the podium. Move up to the podium when called or when it's your turn.
2. Stop at the podium and pause. Stop at the place where testimony is given and take a deep breath.
3. Look at each member of the panel briefly. Slowly sweep your eyes down the row of people to whom you will speak. Look at each one for almost a second. Hint: As you look try to make eye contact with each person.
4. Look directly at the chairperson or leader of the hearing. This person usually sits in the middle of the panel. You should address all your comments to this person.
5. State your name.
6. Make a statement about yourself. Tell the panel some key bit of information about yourself that makes your comments particularly important. Examples: "It may not look like it to you, but I'm disabled." "To you, I probably look just like anybody you might see on the street. But I'm poor."
7. Describe your circumstances. Describe some details about the condition that you just identified. Be brief: 5-10 seconds. Examples: "I can't read." "I have three kids at home and I haven't worked three days in a row since

- August.”
8. Tell how this happened or what led up to it. Tell some details about what caused or contributed to your circumstances. Be brief: 5-10 seconds. Examples: “When I was a kid, my disability was not diagnosed, and I didn’t get the special kind of help from my teacher that I needed.” “I was laid off eight months ago when the tire plant closed, and my unemployment is out.”
 9. Tell what this means to you in your everyday life. Explain how your circumstances affect the way you live, the decisions you make, the things you do, or the way that you are treated by others. Be brief: about 10 seconds. Examples: “Now I can’t go to a restaurant alone, because I’m too embarrassed to tell the waitress I can’t read the menu. I can’t drive, because I can’t read the signs on the road. I can’t even read stories to my own children. I’m not stupid. I just never learned how to read.” “When I walk home from the job service each day, I check the dumpsters for things we need. I found this shirt in an alley! So how can I pay a \$160 utility bill?”
 10. Pause. Hint: Take a deep breath and count to three while breathing out slowly.
 11. Tell how the decision these people make will affect you personally. Describe the likely effect of the proposed change on you. Will things be better, worse, or stay the same? Explain the difference between the way things are for you now and the way things will probably be for you if things are changed. Be brief: about 5-10 seconds. Examples: “Whatever you do won’t change things for me. It’s too late for me.” “As it stands now, if you don’t start charging us less for the heat, I’ll just have to quit paying my bills altogether and take my chances with next winter. But if you start these new rates, maybe we can keep our use low enough and get by and catch up on our bills. Then maybe next spring I’ll have a job.”
 12. Tell how the decision will affect others you know. If you know others who will be affected, tell how the change will affect them. Be brief: about 5-10 seconds. Examples: “But it’s not too late for these young kids. If you change the law, the way I hear it, the kids whose lives were looking brighter than mine will end up

suffering the same as I did. Teachers won’t know that they have a disability. They’ll push the kids too hard, or in the wrong way, or, most likely they will give up on them like they gave up on me. Those kids will just turn into shadows.” “But you know it’s not just me. My neighbor’s in the same boat. Except he has less seniority at the plant. So that’s at least two of us.”

13. Ask a value question. Ask a question or two about what seems most important. Important values include ideas such as freedom of choice, equal opportunity, safety, fairness or justice, self-respect, and progress. Examples: “So, what do you tell a kid like me? Where’s the justice in it? What kind of progress have we made when kids like me still can’t learn to read?” “So, how am I supposed to keep my kids warm? What would you want me to do, if we changed places?”
14. Pause and look at each member briefly. Slowly sweep your eyes down the row of people to whom you have spoken. Look at each one for almost a second. As you look, try to make contact with each person.
15. Leave the podium. Turn away from the podium and return to your seat. Optional: You may wish to say thank you before leaving the podium.

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