

Telling Your Story...

...about your experiences as a parent of a child with special needs
...about the importance of support services for children and adults with special needs

Everyone has a story to tell.

Personal stories are a very effective way to help legislators and policymakers understand how issues, policies and legislation affect real people in real ways.

Identify one aspect of your experiences that you can use to create a memorable verbal snapshot.

Choose one focus for your story. Don't try to tell your entire story. Including too much information and detail will make your story less effective and less likely to be remembered.

Have a clear message.

Always keep in mind the reason why you are telling your story. Make sure that there is a clear connection between your story and a current issue, policy or piece of legislation.

Keep your audience in mind.

Make sure that the message in your story is interesting and relevant to the audience who will hear it.

Share your passion.

The more expressive you are, the more you will engage your audience and the more compelling and effective your story will be. Use words and descriptions to help your audience feel like they are there with you in your story.

Plan, and then practice, practice, practice!

When speaking to policymakers and legislators, you typically have about **two or three minutes** in which to tell your story and communicate your message. Therefore, to be effective, you must plan what you will say and then practice saying it. Write yourself a script. Practice getting the words right and then practice adding expression and passion. Time yourself – make sure that you can speak clearly and at a reasonable pace and wrap up your story and message in the time you will have.

Resources:

Andresen, K, and M. Morehouse. 2007. 5 Elements of a Good Story. Network for Good Learning Center. <http://www.fundraising123.org/article/5-elements-good-story>

Andresen, K, and M. Morehouse. 2007. 7 Ways to Improve Your Storytelling. Network for Good Learning Center. <http://www.fundraising123.org/article/7-ways-improve-your-storytelling>

How to Give Public Testimony

One way you can be an effective advocate on issues that affect children with disabilities is to give testimony or input on legislation, regulations and policies that affect education and services for children with disabilities. Testimony or comments may be given in person at state and local public hearings and legislative committee meetings.

If you are not comfortable with public speaking, or even if you are, writing letters to state and local legislators, school board members, and government officials is also an important way to advocate. Because time is limited, relatively few people have the chance to give public testimony or comments on any particular issue, but everyone has the chance to write letters.

It is very important for public officials to hear the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities.

Find out when public hearings and legislative committee meetings are held.

Sign up with advocacy organizations to receive email alerts about issues important to you. Visit the California Legislature web site for information on current and upcoming events: <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/>. The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors web site has a schedule of their meetings: <http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us/index.aspx?nid=193> . Call your city or school district to find out when city council and school board meetings are held.

Find out how you can testify or provide comment.

Opportunities to give testimony before legislative committees and public agencies are usually arranged ahead of time. Advocacy organizations often line up knowledgeable individuals to provide testimony, so let these organizations know that you are available and interested in providing testimony when issues related to your interests and experiences come before legislative committees and government agencies. Public hearings usually allow time for members of the public to provide comments. If you are interested in giving input at a public hearing, find out ahead of time how the meeting will be run and what procedures will be used for giving testimony or providing comment. Be sure to arrive early and to sign in on the list of persons wanting time to speak.

Put your testimony or comments in writing.

You will have only a limited time to speak, usually 3-5 minutes. It is therefore very important to organize your thoughts ahead of time and to write down the points you want to make so that you can be sure to cover them in the time you are given. Having your testimony or comments in writing will allow you to give copies to committee members to help them remember what you said. Be sure to include your contact information along with the text of your testimony or comments so that committee members can contact you for more information if needed.

Be concise and stay on topic.

Begin by stating your name and where you are from. Talk about your personal experiences as appropriate and explain how your experiences relate to the specific legislation, regulation or policy under consideration. You can also speak about related issues, but be sure to keep your message focused and clear. In summary, "Be brief. Be sincere. Be seated." (Franklin Delano Roosevelt).

Resources:

"How to Give Public Testimony to the State Vocational Rehabilitation Committee".
<http://labor.alaska.gov/svrc/public-testimony/tips-public-testimony.pdf>

"State House Basics: Giving Testimony on Infant-Toddler Issues". ZERO TO THREE Policy Center.
<http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/newsletters/tips-for-giving-testimony-on.html>