HOW TO TESTIFY AT A PUBLIC LEGISLATIVE HEARING

Testifying at a public hearing is one of the most effective ways to engage with an important legislative action in your state. Submitting testimony is a path to engaging our lawmakers who depend on your to weigh in on their policy decision making.

BEFORE A PUBLIC LEGISLATIVE HEARING

There’s a lot you can do to prepare for submitting your testimony at a public legislative hearing. Indeed, once you’ve testified, it will seem like a lot of time and energy has gone into the two- or three-minute interval reserved for the oral testimony. But the better you prepare, the more effective your testimony will be.

These are some of the actions you can take to prepare for testifying at a legislative hearing:

- **Attend any public hearing** of the committee that will be hearing the death with dignity bill (likely judiciary or health) or watch a video recording of such a hearing on your state legislature’s website to observe the hearing process. It can help your comfort level when it’s time for your bill.

- **Sign up to receive notices** about your bill or updates from the committee hearing the bill; most legislatures have a bill notification feature at their website. Alternatively, sign up for our updates, we send out action alerts before every legislative hearing.

- **Read the bill.** All too often people give testimony on provisions they misinterpret, e.g. from media stories, or that even aren’t in the bill. Nothing causes loss of credibility faster than an incorrect testimony. You can find your state’s bill at DeathwithDignity.org/States/YOURSTATE.

- **Learn your legislature’s guidelines** for submitting public testimony. Rules to watch out for include the process for oral testimony (especially the time limits) and submitting hard copies of your testimony.

- **Verify the hearing details**, including date, time, location, as well as rules (or changes in rules specific to your committee) for testifying as soon as the committee issues the hearing notice.

- **Contact the committee clerk** to request any special accommodations.

- **Draft your testimony** (see below).

- **Submit your written testimony in advance** according to the rules of your legislature. Then work on your oral presentation.
PLANNING YOUR TESTIMONY

Testimony can be oral or written. Ideally, you can submit both.

Most legislatures allow oral testimony at public legislative hearings. Speaking at the hearing makes a significant impact that day and is a powerful way to personally connect with committee members.

Because death with dignity bills tend to draw large numbers of testimonies, the committee chair(s) may limit the number of testimonies and the length of each testimony at the hearing.

Even if you testify in person, plan to submit written testimony as well. You should be prepared to give your oral testimony in about two to three minutes, the typical limit at crowded hearings on death with dignity bills.

The written version of your testimony can be an unabridged version of your oral testimony. In other words, your written testimony can be as long as needed, a more elaborate version of your oral testimony outlining your story and argument in greater detail. However, make sure your testimony doesn’t run for pages on end.

Be sure to reference your written testimony in your oral testimony and bring as many copies of your written testimony as there are committee members or as many as the hearing rules specify.

“Legislation is decided by those who show up.”

—UNKNOWN
HOW TO CRAFT AN EFFECTIVE TESTIMONY

The text of your testimony can make or break your impact at the hearing. Make sure your testimony contains the following elements:

- **Introduce yourself:**
  - Greet the committee chair by title and name and address the whole committee, e.g. “Good morning, Chair [NAME] and members of the [NAME OF COMMITTEE] Committee.”
  - Thank the committee for giving you the opportunity to speak.
  - Introduce yourself to the committee and let them know what expertise or experience has brought you to testify, e.g. “My name is John Doe, I live in [TOWN[, and [if applicable] I am [TITLE] of [ORGANIZATION].”

- **State your position, e.g. “I support [BILL NUMBER], [BILL TITLE].”**

- **Make the ask.** Tell the committee what you want them to do, e.g. pass the bill. This can help focus the committee and provide them with more context for the information you are presenting to support your ask.

- **Provide a roadmap.** Give a one-sentence overview of the main points you will make that support the committee taking the action you have asked them to take. This will also help the committee remain engaged in your testimony and understand the context of the arguments you will be making.

- **Elaborate.** There are two main routes your testimony can take.
  - **Arguments.** If you are a subject matter expert or you have unique knowledge or perspective to offer, you may wish to take the argument route. If you do so, make your arguments in favor of the bill in as succinct a manner as possible, starting with the main point you want to make. Then back your main point with real world examples or data, making sure the information is accurate and you are well-versed in it and confident you’d be able to answer the committee’s questions about it (Death with Dignity can help provide the information you need, be it at our website or by email). End with an analysis of why that information supports your point. Avoid jargon and acronyms.
  - **Personal story.** Personal stories are the most powerful and persuasive aspect of public hearings. They ground policy in real life and depoliticize it; talking about real people humanizes the issue and connects people to common ground; and it is easier for people to grasp concepts and retain information about provisions in a bill tied to real experiences.

- **Summarize and repeat the ask.** Once you have made all your points, summarize how the information presented should lead the committee to take the action you want them to take. Ask for specific action, e.g. “I urge you to vote in favor of / Yes on [BILL NUMBER], [TITLE].”

- **Thank the committee** for the opportunity to speak and offer to answer questions they may have.
PRACTICE YOUR TESTIMONY

Unless you memorize your oral testimony, print it out with a font large enough (min. 16pt) to comfortably see and read or refer to it while sitting at a desk or standing at podium or a microphone.

Practice your oral testimony until you feel comfortable and able to keep it under the committee’s time limit. If certain words or phrases cause you to stumble, rework them until it flows better.

If you tend to speak rapidly, practice slowing your pace to ensure the committee catches everything you say.

OVERCOMING FEAR OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

Fear of speaking in front of others is the most common reason people give for not wanting to testify. Yet every voice is necessary. Don’t underestimate the power of your personal story. If you are worried about speaking at a hearing, keep the following in mind:

• A public hearing is the most important part of the legislative process and, generally speaking, the only place a voting citizen has an opportunity to contribute to the law-making process in their state.
• Committee members are accustomed to hearing from nervous speakers and speakers with emotional personal stories, and you’ll find them supportive of you.
• If you are very nervous and/or distraught and are certain you cannot get through verbal testimony, you can have a friend or other supportive person read your testimony for you while you stand with them.

We, as committee members, rely on the voices of the people through testifying at public hearings and/or submitted written statements to understand both sides of the issues presented in a bill before us. Your opinions matter and are extremely important. The testimonies left with us are reviewed and taken into consideration during sessions we hold after a public hearing. Many times valid information brought to us is used or referenced to during a floor debate or statement presented to the full house when a bill is being voted on.

—NEW HAMPSHIRE STATE REPRESENTATIVE WENDY CHASE, MEMBER OF THE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
THE DAY OF THE HEARING

Attending the hearing can be exciting for some and nerve-wracking for others. It may be more fun if you travel together with others in the same vehicle (not to mention easier to find parking). These tips will help you navigate the day.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE FOR THE HEARING

A legislative hearing can be stressful, particularly if you are testifying for the first time or you haven't testified a lot, or if you are deeply invested in the issue. Before you leave your home or office for the hearing make sure you do the following:

- Verify the hearing location, start time, driving directions, and any parking instructions.
- Dress as you might for a job interview.
- Have something to eat/drink ahead of time. Most municipal buildings will not allow food or beverages in hearing rooms.
- Remember to observe all legislative guidelines and procedures and to be flexible, polite, and respectful.

SHOW UP EARLY

Hearings on death with dignity bills tend to be crowded affairs. Often the designated committee hearing room fills up quickly and the committee arranges for an overflow room where you can listen to the hearing over speakers or watch it on a screen.

In most cases every person wishing to testify will need to sign up to do so outside the hearing room. At the door, legibly print your name on the speaker registration sheet.

Most of the time, citizen testimony will be on the first-come-first-served basis. It is, therefore, important to show up to the hearing early, well in advance even.

IN THE HEARING ROOM

Many bills may be heard on the hearing day, and often will not be presented in the order they appear on the legislative calendar. Be patient and remain close by for when your name is called or join the line of people waiting for their turn to speak on your bill.

Once your name is called, approach the microphone and begin your testimony:
• Some online resources recommend you not read from a paper while speaking to a committee. That isn’t easy to do unless you are an experienced speaker. It is fine to read from a paper when giving testimony and committees are accustomed to people doing that. If your written testimony is lengthy, create a summary version you can read within two to three minutes.

• **Speak directly into the microphone.** It should be about 6 inches from your chin.

• **Address your remarks only to the committee** or task force.

• **Have a friend snap a photo of you** while you are testifying and post to social media.

• **Avoid repeating points made by other speakers.** If all the points you wanted to make have been made, tell the committee you agree with the testimony given by the preceding speakers, urge them to take the appropriate action, and share your personal story, if you have any prepared.

• If the committee asks questions, **answer only those questions that you can answer truthfully and factually.** It’s okay to say, “I don’t know, but I will get back to you.” Be sure you follow up promptly if you’ve promised information.

Your oral testimony at the hearing may be live-streamed and also recorded, on audio or video. The recording may also be made available to the public for later listening or viewing on the legislature’s website.

Your written testimony will become a part of the public record and will be available to the committee in their working session.
AFTER THE HEARING
THANK-YOU NOTE

There’s a lot of value in following up with committee members after a hearing. The most effective way to do that is by phone or by a handwritten thank-you note. Whether calling or writing, following up is an important part of engaging with your legislature.

Your communications should be simple, direct, and should acknowledge the time and effort lawmakers (even the ones you disagree with) put into serving the public.

A simple thank you can be memorable to lawmakers who hear often from dissatisfied people. If you know a group of supporters or are connected to a local grassroots organization, consider gathering together for a note-writing party if that is possible. It’s a fun way to follow up.

It should be fairly easy to find contact information for each member of the committee on your state legislature website.

Thank-you note example:

Dear [TITLE] [LAST NAME],

I attended the public hearing for [BILL NUMBER], [BILL TITLE], on [DATE] and submitted testimony to the [NAME OF COMMITTEE] Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony in of the bill. It means everything to know you will fairly consider my input on this important issue.

[Add a sentence about why you want the law to pass or ask the committee to vote for it].

Sincerely,

[YOUR NAME]
[YOUR ADDRESS]
[YOUR PHONE NUMBER]

FEEDBACK

We’d love to hear how your testimony went. Would you take a moment to share your experience testifying? Please take a minute (literally) to fill out a short questionnaire at

DeathwithDignity.org/Take-Action/Share-Experience-Testifying/

Thank you!