Providing testimony at a hearing before your state legislature is a great opportunity to shape the thinking of policy makers as well as to send a public message about the issues important to your organization. Below are a few key pointers to bear in mind as you prepare your testimony.

You have been asked to testify because your experience and perspective is an important part of the legislative process. You have probably been invited by your legislator to speak in support of or opposition to an issue that is the subject of a piece of legislation. Perhaps, the legislation has been introduced by the legislator who invited you. Legislators are seeking a better understanding of how the legislation in question impacts the community it targets. That’s where you come in. Your job is to use the opportunity to speak persuasively, and in a relatable way, about the underlying issue.

You will be asked to provide written as well as spoken testimony. You should not expect to read your entire written testimony during the hearing. In most cases, witnesses have between three and five minutes to speak. Use your spoken remarks to highlight key points in your written testimony. Here’s how to make your testimony count:

* **Be prepared to give a solid performance**. The only differences between giving a speech at a conference or other professional gathering and testifying before a committee are that, in committee you have a much shorter time to speak, you will be seated, and your audience is primarily people who are not experts in your topic. To ensure that you efficiently use the short amount of time provided, you will want to practice your spoken testimony to ensure that you can deliver it comfortably in the time allotted and that your delivery is clear and compelling. Have a family member or colleague watch you and provide feedback. You may want to video yourself so that you can review your performance.
* **Make your written and spoken testimony as personal as possible**. A committee hearing is, after all, a performance. You are an actor, of sorts, in a play. And like any other piece of theater, the audience tends to root for the most sympathetic and relatable character. Your testimony is your chance to get the committee members to relate to you and to sympathize with your concerns. Elected officials are looking for how the legislation they are considering impacts the lives of their constituents. This is your chance to show them.
* **Anticipate questions**. After each witness has delivered their testimony, there is often an opportunity for legislators to ask questions. Do your homework about the committee members so that you know their positions and the kinds of questions they are likely to ask. Questions may stray beyond the topic of your testimony – or even the hearing itself. Do not hesitate to say “I don’t know” or “I’m happy to research that question and get back to you” if a question is outside your area of expertise.
* **Keep your cool**. Some legislators may be opposed to your position or may use their questions to score political points. Don’t get flustered or allow yourself to be drawn into an argument. Pivot back to the points that you want to make.
* **Know the rules**. Know how many copies you must provide to the committee and how your testimony must be formatted, arranged and delivered. Most of this information should be provided to you in your letter of invitation, but if it is not, consult the committee’s website.

**Recommended Guidelines for Written and Spoken Testimony**

1) Identify yourself and your organization.

2) Greet the chairman and members of the committee and thank them for the opportunity to testify.

3) If applicable, clearly state your position as “for” or “against” the legislation in question.

4) Use facts to back up your arguments and to support your position.

5) Use personal stories or anecdotes to build context and relatability.

6) In your conclusion, restate your position and thank the committee again for the opportunity to speak.

**Dos and Don’ts for the Day of the Hearing:**

Do arrive early. Make sure you follow any procedures that have been published.

Do not repeat points made by speakers ahead of you. If all of the points you wanted to make have been made, tell the committee you agree with the testimony given by the preceding speakers and urge them to take the appropriate action. You might use the opportunity to further substantiate an earlier point or to share a useful personal experience.

Be willing to say “I don’t know.” Questions can stray from the topic of your testimony – or even of the hearing. Respond only to those questions that you can answer correctly, and answer as clearly and truthfully as you can. If you do not know the answer to a question, offer to get back to the committee when you have had the opportunity to find the correct answer.

Do not argue with members of the committee or with people giving opposing testimony. When you were invited, the expectation was that you would be a reliable witness and an honest broker of ideas. Do not undermine that expectation by becoming argumentative or combative.

Don’t be pulled off topic or into a “gotcha” moment. Sometimes, legislators can use a hearing to score political points or create content for their social media accounts. Avoid being pulled into those scenarios by respectfully reminding the legislator of what you were invited to the hearing to discuss and by politely declining to comment on extraneous issues.