

How To Testify in Trenton

Basic Guidelines

By William Eames

Overview

Under the New Jersey State Constitution, even more specifically than under the U.S. Constitution,

"All political power is inherent in the people. Government is instituted for the protection, security and benefit of the people and they have the right at all times to alter or reform the same, whenever the public good may require it."

Thus, YOUR INPUT, suggestions, comments, criticisms and concerns regarding proposed legislation is not only welcome, but you have an obligation to become involved by monitoring and actively following the activities of the New Jersey Senate, General Assembly, Governor and New Jersey Supreme Court.

What Does "Testifying" Involve?

To "testify" on pending legislation means you comment on a proposal either orally or in writing, or more commonly both orally and in writing.

To do this, you need to familiarize yourself with the issue (through newspapers, TV, the internet ... or by calling one of your local legislators to ask questions), then thoughtfully develop comments you would like to make. Your comments should not be insulting or rude, but should be factual. The best remarks specifically describe how the proposed legislation would directly affect you or your business.

Next, you either mail or email your remarks to your local legislator (which really isn't "testifying") or you make a trip to Trenton, attend a meeting of the specific legislative committee which is considering the legislation, and sit in front of their microphone to directly comment on the legislation.

How Do You Do This?

It's not as hard as it may sound, but it does involve some homework. Below are some of the questions you need to ask, and where you can go to begin to get the answers. Always ASK whomever you speak with about WHERE you can get more information, or WHO you might speak with who knows this issue. Do NOT be shy.

1) WHAT. Find out what is the issue. Obtain (online, from a local legislator or by mail) a copy of the legislation in question. Familiarize yourself with what problem caused someone or some group to want this legislation, what the legislation would do, and why somebody believes the proposed legislation will help solve the problem. It's best to do your own research, rather than to rely only on what

someone else says. (Most bills can be researched directly online, and copies of the bills can be printed at home. Go to www.MorrisPatriots.org, click on the ActionTools tab, and scan down to the "Trenton Lobbying" section. Click on "Fast Lookup Page," and then enter the bill number at the top right of the page, and press [enter].

2) WHEN. Find out when the proposed legislation will be considered. Find out which committee is going to discuss the legislation (or whether it is already before the full General Assembly or Senate). Once you have the bill number (above), click on the bill number to obtain a summary, a listing of sponsors, a schedule of what committees have or will hear the bill, the status of the bill and links to print out the full text of the bill, any amendments, and any comments by any of the committees who have considered the bill.

3) WHERE. Find out where the proposed legislation will be considered – What committee room, what building or location? After you learn which committee will consider the bill next, write down the full name of that committee. Then, on that same webpage, shift to the left-most column, click on either "Senate Committees" or "Assembly Committees," then scroll to the committee which will consider the bill. Then, under the name of the committee, click on "Committee Schedule." Then, click on a given date to see which proposals (bill #'s) will be heard that day.

4) WHO. Who proposed this legislation? (You can learn this from the steps listed in #2, above.

5) WHY. Why was this issue brought to the Legislature? You may have to phone the office of one of the sponsors of the bill to ask this question. So do it! Call – Most office staff members are quite friendly and are happy to help you.

6) HOW. How will the committee conduct its hearing? How will this legislation solve the problem? How can it be improved? These questions are the heart of your testimony. You have to have an idea of how to improve most legislation, or you won't be comfortable testifying. The exception would be broad bills where all you what to do is stop the bill, or block future action on it.

Writing Your Comments

Once you have done your homework, type up your remarks. For a sample of remarks we've prepared in the past, go to www.MorrisPatriots.org, then to the Action Tools tab, scroll down to "Trenton Lobbying" on the left, then click on "Example of Testimony".

Delivering Your Testimony

Reproduce enough copies of your remarks so that every member of the committee will have one, with two extra for the transcriber, plus any copies you want to have for the news media or others in the audience.

You have done your homework, understand the issue, know what the proposed legislation says, have written your remarks with a SUMMARY at the beginning, and have traveled to Trenton on the appointed day and hour, and found the committee hearing room.

Now, having arrived early, either there will be cards on a table in the room for you to Sign In to Testify, or someone will be handing the cards out. You fill in the card with your name, the bill you want to testify on, a few words describing your testimony ("for S 708", for example), and your home town. Hand the card to the collector, or put them on the table by the sign.

People will be called to testify in a modified order: The governor or a spokesperson first, Senators next, Assemblymen third, "big time" experts next, then members of the public, mostly on a first-come, first-served basis ... but not always. Be Patient.

You'll probably see how others testify before it's your turn. If not, come up to the microphone when called upon, and hand the copies of your testimony intended for the committee members and transcribers to the clerk. Then state your full name and home town, be sworn (if required for this hearing), and then clearly and distinctly, read your SUMMARY remarks, so that you do not take longer than 3 minutes. If any committee members have questions, they will ask you through the chairperson. Respond briefly and clearly.

That's it !

Once you've handed in your remarks, read your summary, answered any questions ... then you are finished. If people are waiting in line, then move to the back of the room or leave, so that they can have their turn to testify.

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