



FAMM Tips: Legislative Advocacy From Prison

STEP 1: Know that your voice matters, and that you can have an impact on federal and state laws. Engaging with lawmakers from prison is legislative advocacy. The federal government and most states have two legislative chambers (for example, the House of Representatives and Senate) and an executive (for example, the president or governor). Each plays a critical role in making laws that affect sentences and prisons. To become law, bills must be approved by committees, passed by both legislative chambers, and signed by the executive. Lawmakers are elected by people in the districts they represent, and care about what people think (especially registered voters, your families). They keep track of how many people contact them about different issues. Since these laws affect you, your voice should be heard. What you say to them can change hearts and minds.

STEP 2: Decide what pending bill or issue you want to advocate. Think about your own experience. For ideas, check your law library and FAMM emails (if you receive them), and have your family and friends check our website (<https://famm.org/our-work/>).

STEP 3: Identify your lawmakers and their contact information. Check your law library and ask your family to use FAMM’s “Find Your Lawmaker” tool here: <https://famm.org/actioncenter/>. You may wish to reach out strategically to lawmakers who represent your home or prison district, those who introduced a bill you support or oppose, or those who serve on relevant committees. (For example, judiciary committees control most legislation relating to criminal justice reform; policy committees decide each party’s biggest priorities; sentencing commissions create sentencing guidelines, etc.). Research the lawmakers if you can.

STEP 4: Decide how to most effectively communicate with lawmakers you want to reach. Common methods of communication include letters, phone calls, emails, and in-person meetings. Lawmaker visits with people in prisons can be *very* impactful. Your family can also meet with lawmakers. FAMM recommends writing letters as a first step because you can write, review, and edit what you wrote before you send it. Discuss the bills and your message with others to learn and practice new ways of discussing important issues.

Identify yourself and the type of reform you want the lawmaker to consider. For example, “Senator _____, my name is _____, and I’m writing to ask you to please support bill _____, which would _____.” Briefly discuss the reasons you believe the lawmaker should support or oppose the bill. (Examples: “I am 60 years old and sick, and this bill would allow me to go home with my family” or “This bill would give me more educational and vocational training, so I can find a job when I get out.”) End the communication by thanking the person for considering your views, and provide your full name and contact information in case they want to reach you. Consider including a photograph of yourself or your loved ones to put a human face on the need for reform.



STEP 5: Consider these guidelines *before* contacting lawmakers: Review your communication before you send it. It can be helpful to write what you want to say, then reread it a few days later. Ask a person you trust to review what you've written. Verify the lawmaker's proper title, name spelling, address, etc. Keep your communication focused on one issue. Don't communicate with the same person about the same thing repeatedly. One communication per issue per legislative session (or important phase of the bill) is sufficient. The goal is to get more people doing legislative advocacy, so lawmakers will see that a lot of people care.

Don't communicate anything about the facts of a case that is not final. This means you should not talk about the details of your case if you are awaiting trial, pending appeals, PCRAs, evidentiary hearings, etc. *Communications with lawmakers are not private, and could be used against you in a legal case.* If you decide it is safe to talk about the facts of your case, do not minimize your role. Focus the communication on what you want to change proactively. *Do not spend the communication on negativity.*

STEP 6: After you have seriously considered all guidelines and reviewed your communication, send it. Congratulations, you have now officially engaged in legislative advocacy!

STEP 7: Consider next steps and spread the word. Is there another lawmaker who could impact the same issue? Is there another issue you'd like to support or oppose? Encourage your friends and family to do legislative advocacy. The more people building the movement for reform, the better. Finally, don't forget. Continue advocating after your release. Fill in the gaps for those left behind and advocate in ways you wish others had done for you when you were still in prison. Here's to your voice being heard.

For more information, contact famm@famm.org or (202) 822-6700.



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