



# Guide to Testifying at Your State Legislature

Testifying is a valuable way to use your voice as a medical student to take a stance on legislation that affects reproductive health access and care. The procedure for testifying, the structure of committee hearings, and content of your testimony will all vary based on the legislation, the legislative committee you are testifying before, and the state you are in. Work with your local NARAL Pro-Choice America or Planned Parenthood affiliate to prepare effective testimony, and stay up to date on reproductive health-related legislation in your state.

## Writing Testimony

- **DO** clearly state your position on the bill, the bill number, and why legislators should oppose or support the bill. Establish to the legislative committee that you have expertise in this area as a medical student seeking training. While it can seem intimidating, remember that you have more medical knowledge than most, if not all (depending on the committee), of the legislators.
- **DO** focus on how legislation will impact medical education and training, how it may impact where medical students complete their residency, and where ob-gyns practice due to legal restrictions on the reproductive health care they provide for their patients.
- **DO** include a relevant personal story if possible, or a story demonstrating potential impact of the legislation for patients and physicians.
- **DO** make it clear that your opinions are your own and not those of your institution, and make sure you are in compliance with any school media policies. <sup>1</sup>
- **DON'T** inform lawmakers that they are not equipped to make medical decisions that should be made by patients and doctors. They believe they are equipped.
- **DON'T** include too many medical details, which are not convincing for lawmakers. The human impact of the legislation is more effective, however some small easily understood details may benefit your argument.

## Preparing to Testify

- **Read the bill** prior to testifying, or the executive summary. Practice delivering your testimony, and keep it to 2-5 minutes (one page is sufficient). If possible, practice delivering it in front of someone with no background knowledge to make sure your argument is clear.
  - You can also review prior testimony to see what's already been stated. This can often be found on the legislative website or by contacting the chair of the committee in which the bill is being heard.
- **Connect** with your state NARAL or Planned Parenthood office for the following:
  - Assistance in writing, editing, and submitting testimony
  - Talking points, Q & A sheets, and executive summaries on legislation
  - Information on upcoming hearings, when to prepare testimony, and the process for submitting it (you can also find this information on the legislative website or by contacting the committee chair.)
- For friendly bills, the legislator's office sponsoring the bill will be a good resource as well.
- **Research** the committee, its members, and chair of the committee using the state legislative website to see what kind of bills they've sponsored, and whether they likely have medical knowledge or not.
- **Prepare** for long waiting periods. You will be given the hearing date a few days ahead of time, but you may not know what time you're testifying until the day of. There will be other people there to testify, and there may be other bills on the agenda. Generally, you can leave after delivering testimony.

## Delivering Testimony

- **Submitting testimony.** It is common practice to submit a written version of your oral testimony to the committee beforehand, though this varies by state. Written testimony will go into the legislative record. If you can't go in person, *you can always submit written testimony*. There is no need to memorize your oral testimony. Be aware that you may be recorded. There may also be a livestream.
- **Committee Protocol.** When called, address the Chair of the committee with Chairman, or Chairwoman X. Address the Ranking Minority member by their title, Ranking Minority Member X. Prepare this information ahead of time by asking the office of the legislator proposing the bill, or your local advocacy organization.
- **Introductions.** Introduce yourself including your name, city, and the name of the organization you are representing (e.g. Medical Students for Choice.) Wear your white coat (even without school name), as the symbol gives legitimacy.
- **Answering Questions.** Members of the committee might ask questions and may interrupt you. Always end your testimony by inviting questions from the committee members. When you are asked a question, start your answer with Chairman/woman X and Committee Member Y (Committee Member Y is the member who asked the question). If the committee chair asks the question you only need to address the chair.
  - Always respond calmly. Legislators may try to make you answer questions on an unrelated topic, but stay as on topic as possible. Don't let a hostile question upset you, take a deep breath and answer as best you can. Even if you don't agree with the position of the questioner, respect their office. By showing respect, you receive respect.
  - Don't answer a question if you don't know the answer. Be honest, and tell the committee member that you don't know the answer but will get back to them as soon as possible. Make sure to follow up in the next week, and email the answer to all of the committee members. NARAL or Planned Parenthood can help you prepare the follow-up answer.
  - If you receive a question that seems inappropriate, misinformed, or off topic you can address it simply. For example: "That's not why I'm here today, I'm here to talk about my experiences, or on behalf of patients."
  - Medical students are most likely to get questions focused on personal experience, as opposed to medical knowledge, though this has been known to happen occasionally.
- **Follow up** with the committee members (especially since a good number are often not actually present to hear the testimony) with an email or a card to thank them for listening to the testimony, and reinforce a key point that you made.

## Why is it valuable for medical students to testify?

- ❖ Anti-abortion legislation can affect access to abortion training, and where physicians can practice comprehensive reproductive care. Restrictions may drive residents and ob-gyns out of hostile states, and medical students can highlight this consequence. Legislators may not care about abortion access, but will likely be more invested in patient access to ob-gyns for other reasons.
- ❖ Lawmakers often know little about abortion, and how it affects other kinds of health care. There are commonly repeated misconceptions held by lawmakers that those in the medical field must counter.
- ❖ Having someone who isn't an abortion provider stand up for abortion access can sometimes carry more weight, because lawmakers often do not want to listen to providers. Students with "open minds" may be perceived as having less subjective views on the issues.
- ❖ Testimony on the record can contribute to litigation efforts down the line, and can demonstrate a lawmaker's intention through their recorded response to testimony. The more testimony opposed to anti-abortion legislation on the record, the better. State advocates can refer to this testimony in the future too.
- ❖ The medical community is able to speak to patient experiences in a way that is hard for patients to do because of abortion stigma, which can make it hard for patients to feel comfortable being public.
- ❖ Testifying fortifies an individual's ability and confidence to speak up for the next abortion restriction proposed. Anti-choice legislation will keep coming, so speaking up will be continuously necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> If any medical student faces repercussions from their institution due to testifying in a personal capacity, contact MSFC headquarters at [students@msfc.org](mailto:students@msfc.org) and we will connect you with the National Women's Law Center.

*Thank you to all of the organizations that contributed to the content in this guide including:*

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