



Left: At a recent labor breakfast in MEBA HQ for Rep. Jim Clyburn (center), House Democratic Leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) popped in for an unexpected visit to greet attendees and thank the MEBA. At right is MEBA's Deputy Political Director Mike Bocchini.

Right: MEBA frequently hosts labor or maritime meetings that help educate lawmakers about our issues. This photo captures a recent labor breakfast held in the Headquarters Conference Room for Rep. Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.). Labor unions represented at the breakfast included ILA, UAW, AFL-CIO, IBEW, SEIU, MM&P, SIU, UFCW, AFSCME, TTD (representing transport unions), ALPA, IUOE and many others.



## MEBA's Guide to Contacting Your Member of Congress

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”*

—U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights, Amendment I

Of all of the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment, one of the least remembered is the right to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. Whether in the form of lobbying a specific issue, or simply expressing your opinion to your Senators or House Representative, contacting your Member of Congress is a time-honored way of participating in the political process. Tip O’Neill, Speaker of the House during the 1980s, built a lifetime in public office on a foundation of taking care of his constituents, entitling his guide to public service “All Politics is Local.”

Contacting your Congressional representation can be a daunting task. “Who is my member? How do I get a hold of him or her? What exactly can he or she do for me? Will what I say really make a difference?” and “How do I go about asking for what I need?” are all questions you may ask yourself if you have never contacted your Member of Congress before.

In order to facilitate your personal lobbying of your Congressional delegation, the government affairs staff at MEBA headquarters has prepared this short guide.

### WHO IS YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS?

The first step in contacting your Senators and House Representative is to figure out who they are. The websites to look them up on are [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov). To find your specific House member you will need to enter the ZIP Code of your voting address into the House of Representatives’ [www.house.gov/writerep/](http://www.house.gov/writerep/).

There aren’t many differences between contacting your representative in the Senate or the House. Both are there to represent you. However, considering that most Senators have considerably more constituents than House members, you may find your House member more responsive to your request, simply because they are handling a smaller volume of correspondence.

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Members of Congress have two kinds of offices – Washington, D.C. offices located on Capitol Hill, which generally deal with federal legislation and Congressional committee work. District Offices, which are located in your state, generally deal with casework, services and grants, frequently referred to as “constituent action.”

### THE WASHINGTON OFFICE

The Washington Office of your House member or Senator handles legislation before Congress and the various committees in the House and Senate. Each member usually sits on at least one, but frequently more, committees in their respective bodies.

Legislative Assistants in your member’s office are assigned to cover legislation before the various committees. A member from a rural area may have one staffer to cover Agriculture while another staffer might cover four or more committees on which the member does not serve.

If you have a question on a specific piece of legislation before Congress you should contact the D.C. office and reference both the bill number and the title of the legislation. You should keep in mind which chamber the bill has been introduced in. Senate bills are numbered with an “S.” followed by the bill number, i.e. “S. 1.” House bills are numbered with an “H.R.,” i.e. “H.R. 1.” More popular bills will have both a Senate and a House number, but the numbering after S. and H.R. won’t be the same.

You may also want to contact your member about an issue not currently covered by a bill. This could be a problem that you are aware of but one that has not been put before Congress yet. In this case you should address your correspondence to the Legislative Assistant in charge of the committee that this problem would fall under. If it were a problem with the military, you would want to communicate with the staffer covering Armed Services. Finding out which staffer handles which issue usually takes a phone call to the Washington D.C. office.

One more reason to contact the D.C. office is to request a meeting with the member or the member’s staff in Washington D.C. In order to process your scheduling request, the member’s office will want to know your contact information, the name of your organization if requesting a meeting on behalf of an organization, the requested date and time, the number of attendees, and the issues or concerns that you wish to meet about. The earlier you contact your member with a scheduling request the better. Generally, the scheduler will want this information in a fax or email. You can get this information from the office, or via the internet.

### THE DISTRICT OFFICE

The District Office exists to help you with casework, services and grants. Casework generally involves a specific problem you are having with a federal agency, i.e. your mother’s Social Security check. Services assistance more broadly applies to federal services provided in your district, i.e. a Veterans Administration hospital. Grants work involves delivering federal dollars to a program run in your Congressional district.

While the district office cannot ask the federal agencies to do anything that is not under their normal regulatory responsibilities, they can assist you in working with the agency, ensuring that your rights are respected and that procedural errors are corrected.

Common federal agencies that the District Offices assist constituents with are: the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the Department of State (obtaining passports and services), the Social Security Administration (including Medicare), the Internal Revenue Service, the Office of Workers’ Compensation, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Office of Personnel Management (for current and retired federal employees), and the National Personnel Records Center (access to military personnel records).

District Offices can also offer constituents internships for students, Military Service Academy Appointments and help in applying for federal grants.

“Members of Congress have detailed tracking programs in place in both their District and D.C. offices that give them details on how many calls they are receiving on certain issues of interest to their constituents.”

### WELCOME TO THE 21ST CENTURY

After the Anthrax attacks in 2002, Congress has been shifting to an electronic format for much of its correspondence. Phone calls, email and faxes are quickly replacing letters as the preferred format for receiving requests and information from constituents.

Most mail that is delivered to Senate and House Offices has been carefully screened by the U.S. Postal Service to ensure that it is safe – which generally results in a considerable delay in the time it takes to receive and process mail. If the issue you want to discuss is time sensitive, it would be best for you to call or email rather than write a letter.

Email letters generally should be sent in the same format as a written letter. It is very easy to fall into the trap of sending an email to your Member of Congress in the same format you'd send to your family or friends. However, it is more likely that a professional looking email – something similar to what you would write in a letter – will receive a favorable response.

We've provided a sample letter that you can use as a template for your mailings (On page 6)

### DOES MY OPINION MATTER?

Absolutely! Most Members of Congress have detailed tracking programs in place in both their District and D.C. offices that give them details on how many calls they are receiving on certain issues of interest to their constituents.

Many members also use the number of faxes, letters and emails they receive from constituents on a certain issue to track how the issue is being discussed back home. Most legislative assistants have anecdotes about the difference constituent mail has made on a certain issue. It's also a good idea to contact your legislator expressing your approval of their work on an issue of importance to you. That little-received praise is often appreciated and remembered.

MEBA's Political Action Fund provides us with a substantial tool to maintain MEBA's presence on Capitol Hill, but the P.A.F. is only one way that active and retired MEBA members can make their voices heard in Washington D.C. Direct contact in the form of phone calls, letters, emails and faxes to their Members of Congress make the work the P.A.F. does even more effective. Contacting your Senators or House member to inform them of your opinion on issues that affect you is not only a good way to participate in the political process, it's one of your fundamental constitutional rights. ■

MEBA's federal political action committee, The Political Action Fund (P.A.F.), is a separate segregated fund (SSF). Basically, SSFs are political committees established and administered by corporations, labor unions, membership organizations or trade associations. These committees can only solicit contributions from individuals associated with connected or sponsoring organizations. In the case of MEBA's P.A.F., the committee can only solicit contributions from individuals associated with MEBA. MEBA P.A.F. is registered as a Labor Political Action Committee (PAC) with the Federal Elections Committee (FEC) and must file regular reports disclosing its receipts and disbursements to the FEC. The reports can be viewed at [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov). So far in the 2006 election cycle, the P.A.F. has been able to contribute over \$175,000 to 81 maritime supporting candidates for federal office. Through the voluntary contributions of our members and retirees, MEBA's P.A.F. helps to keep your voices heard on Capitol Hill.

In a future *Marine Officer*, we plan to publish a list of all contributors to the P.A.F. during calendar year 2005 through March 2006. Contact your area MEBA Union hall for more information about the Political Action Fund!

## THE FOLLOWING IS A SAMPLE LETTER YOU CAN PERSONALIZE TO FORWARD YOUR ISSUE OF CONCERN TO A MEMBER OF CONGRESS:

The Honorable Jefferson Smith  
3005 Collins Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Smith,

I am writing to you as your constituent and supporter to urge you to support H.R. 1234, The Coast Guard and Merchant Marine Act of 2020. This legislation provides authorization and funding for our U.S. Coast Guard that served our nation so well in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. [Cite both the number and the title of the bill as thousands of bills are introduced in each session of Congress]

The Coast Guard is an often neglected branch of our government that toils day in and day out to secure our coastlines, protect our merchant and recreational mariners, and safeguard our environment. The Coast Guard needs the funds appropriated in H.R. 1234 to ensure the safety and security of U.S. vessels in U.S. waters. [Explain why this bill is important to you]

In the light of the great service of the Coast Guard during Hurricane Katrina I urge you to support the Coast Guard and its role in the response to future national emergencies and disasters caused by a natural event or terrorist action in a U.S. coastal or offshore area.

[Explain why the Member of Congress should support the bill]

[If applicable, suggest setting up a meeting in person with a member of the Congressman's staff] I will be contacting your district office at 221 Main Street in Portland to schedule a meeting with your staff to follow up on this letter and with other concerns I have.

Sincerely,  
Jeremiah O'Brien  
Portland, ME