

Presenting Public Testimony

**You Know More than They Do!
It's Just a Matter of Getting Your Point Across:**

Some Tips

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General Advice

Hearings: Their Purpose & Yours

Purpose of public hearings:

- Gather needed information
- Stir political debate
- Both

Purpose of your providing testimony:

- Inform
- Advocate
- Guide decision making

Hearing notice: Offers a broad array of questions.

Be mindful of your role: Speak only to those issues on which you can:

- Inform
- Advocate
- Guide decision making

General Advice

Nervousness

“Nothing wrong with your knees shakin’. When I first shook, it was half nervousness, half moving to the beat...and look what it did for me.” Elvis Presley

Nervousness, stage fright: Most people have it!

Starts with the thought of having to speak.

Lessens as you prepare. Lessens more as you deliver.

Root cause: Thinking more about yourself than about what you have to say. “What will people think of the tone of my voice?” “My delivery?” “My nervousness?” “How will I be perceived?”

Forget about the **Me**. There is no **Me** in testimony. Focus on your message. The more you concentrate on your message – writing, editing, practicing – the less nervous you will be.

Instruct yourself to relax: You know more on this topic than most people. You’ve lived it.

Deep breathing: Increases oxygen, decreases pulse. Avoid caffeine...but also avoid sedatives.

Become familiar with the setting. Visit it.

General Advice

Attire & Appearance

“At a news conference addressing the disaster in Bosnia...he (President Clinton) wore a tie with smiley faces.” Joan Detz

Each speaking situation has its own style. Examples:

- A campaign speech to farmers in Iowa
- A speech on the economy at the NY Stock Exchange
- A talk to fourth graders on the importance of reading

Dress for success: Getting your message across.

Choose clothes that are appropriate for the occasion and that do not detract from your message. Same is true of jewelry.

Public hearings are more like addressing the NY Stock Exchange than glad-handing pig farmers in Iowa or talking to fourth graders.

Wear cloths that don't wrinkle easily and you are comfortable in.

Posture: Remember what your mother and teachers said:
“Sit up straight...stand up straight...stop fidgeting!”

- It helps with breathing and tone of voice
- It directs attention to your message

General Advice

Length of Presentation

“In November 1863, a noted orator was invited to the consecration of ground for civil war soldiers who died in battle. He spoke for two hours. Who remembers Edward Everett and what he said? That same day, President Lincoln, who was invited to the consecration as an afterthought, recited about 10 sentences in about two minutes. Who remembers the Gettysburg address? It’s not how long you talk, it’s what you say and how.”

Hearing notices list questions/issues for input:

- One I drafted testimony on had 25 questions with many sub-questions about a particular housing modality
- Issues: Finance, oversight, regulation, services, etc.

You may know a lot about all the issues and be tempted to speak at length.

Conversely, you may be intimidated: “I don’t know anything about half these questions.”

Hearing notices also offer time limits on testimony:

- Ten minutes
- Five minutes
- Or, even three minutes

Your job: Pick the most important items that you can address within the allotted time.

Hearings may have timekeepers. You may be cut off if you run too long.

Preparation of Testimony

Imaginary Situation

The Senate Committee on Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities is going to hold a hearing on community residences (small group homes) for individuals with mental retardation. You are very interested. Perhaps it's because you live in one. Perhaps you work in one. Perhaps a loved one of yours lives in one. The hearing notice lists a number of questions/issues the Senate would like input on. Among them are:

Staffing:

- Are staff ratios sufficient?
- Has staffing kept pace with the increasing number of group homes?
- Have salaries kept pace with inflation?
- What is the rate of staff turnover? What is its impact on clients?

Finance:

- Is funding for rent sufficient?
- Are there adequate funds for community-based educational or recreational outings?
- Are Executive compensation packages too high/too low?
- What percentage of state funds goes for fringe benefits (insurance, etc.) for staff? Should this be increased/decreased?

Regulation:

- Are fire/safety codes adequate? What dangers do residents face?
- Do our existing laws prevent abuse/neglect? How can they be strengthened?
- Should more unannounced inspections be made by the state? Why?

The hearing notice indicates that oral testimony should be limited to three minutes. It also indicates how many written copies of your testimony you should bring to the hearing.

Preparation of Testimony

Oral & Written Testimony

“Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” Proverbs 12:18

“Words are but air; the pen leaves a mark” Chinese Proverb

Hearings present opportunities for both oral & written testimony.

Both require preparation. Start with the written testimony. Start by writing. Writing clarifies thinking.

Written testimony allows you to:

- Amplify points in your oral testimony
- Add additional points time won't allow you to say in the time allotted for oral testimony

Written testimony will:

- Become your oral testimony if time permits, or
- Be the foundation from which you can draw the **MOST IMPORTANT POINTS** for a time-limited oral presentation

Regardless of how long or short, written and oral testimony follow the same basic format. They have three sections:

1. Introduction or opening remarks
2. The Body
3. Conclusion

Preparation of Testimony

Sections of Testimony

1) Introduction

- Respectfully greets & thanks the public officials
- Provides a personal frame of reference: your connection to this important issue
- Outlines what is to come in the body

Also, it is very important:

- It's the first time they are meeting you
(You know what they say about first impressions)
- It's the when you'll be the most nervous
(And when the nervousness will begin to disappear)

Fortunately, it's easy to write and say. If done correctly, it will get you over your nervousness quickly.

Sample:

Chairman Smith, and members of the Senate Committee on Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on the important issue of group homes for people with mental retardation. I am Joe Blow and I have a deep interest in this matter, having worked in a group home for the past six years.

My brief remarks will focus on two critical issues which I believe are inter-related: staff salaries and staff turnover. I have provided Committee staff with copies of my written testimony which elaborates on my presentation here today.

Preparation of Testimony

Sections of Testimony

2) The Body

This is where you build your case or present the sales pitch of your message

- You have opinions: pro or con something
- You have facts upon which those opinions are based
- You have recommendations for action

So it should be easy to construct, right? Only if you are careful to pick the one or two issues of the many in the hearing notice that you know the most about (usually what you personally know) and can address in the allotted time.

Example:

Opinion: Inadequate pay for direct care staff in group homes has a negative impact on the people who live there.

Facts: A total of 12 people work in my group home covering all the shifts. Nearly half of them work a second or third job to make ends meet. Each year, half of them leave to find new, better paying jobs. This year alone, with gas and food prices soaring and no change in our rate of pay, eight staff have moved on. This has a tremendous impact on the individuals who live in the home. They truly grieve: one day someone they know, like, trust and depend on is there, the next day, she is mysteriously gone. Some regress, and all have to start again building a relationship with a new staff person who will likely leave soon as well.

Recommendation: The Legislature should act to improve the quality and continuity of care for people living in group homes by ensuring that salaries of direct care staff are tied to the inflation rate.

Preparation of Testimony

Sections of Testimony

3) Conclusion

This is where you gracefully exit your testimony by:

- Again thanking the people holding the hearing for their important work
- Making one last pitch for your cause
- Letting them know you're willing to help in any way

Sample:

In closing, I again thank Chairman Smith and members of this committee for your interest in group homes. With over 40,000 New Yorkers with mental retardation living in group homes, the committee can make great strides in ensuring the quality and continuity of their care by linking, as I suggest, salary increases for people working in the homes to the rate of inflation. If there is any way in which I can be of further assistance on this matter, do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you.

Questions:

When you are done delivering your testimony, someone on the committee may have questions for you. Some tips:

- Answer from your personal knowledge/experience. Don't guess.
- If you don't know, but can find the answer easily, say so: *"I have that information in my office, may I send it to you tomorrow?"*
- If you don't know, and really don't know, deflect the question or redirect it: *"I think that is a question best directed to the Office of Mental Retardation."*
- If possible, use the question to underscore or elaborate on a point in your testimony.

Preparation of Testimony

Practice Makes Perfect

Write, but start first from an outline.

Read what you wrote. Question, “*How can I make this simpler, more direct?*”

Rewrite, re-read, edit. Put it away for a couple of days.

Re-read. Have a friend, a spouse, a mentor read it.

Now practice reading it out loud, again, and again, and again, until it’s not like you’re reading it, but like you’re talking it.

Read it out loud to a friend or into a tape recorder.

Practice not only makes perfect, it makes you more comfortable, less nervous.

Practice also makes the oral presentation seem like second nature.

Some Writing & Speaking Tips

Say it Simply & Vividly

“My addresses will never be as eloquent as Lincoln’s. But I will do my best to equal his brevity and plain speaking.” Gerald Ford...eight months later he became president.

Avoid jargon & legalize – use plain English.

Instead of stating specific cites *“Title 14NYCRR Part 624.14 requires...”* say *“the regulations require...”*

Instead of saying *“In view of the fact that...”* say *“because”*

Weed out words with many syllables, find simpler words.

Look for phrases that can be simplified:

- *“In closing I want to thank...”* can be shorted to *“In closing I thank...”*
- *“The purpose of my presentation is...”* can be shortened to *“My purpose is...”*

Use colorful, vivid words or phrases:

- *“The men and women thriving in my group home...”* is more powerful than *“The men and women living my group home...”*
- *“Staff come and go so quickly, it’s like there’s a revolving door at my group home”* conveys more than *“Staff turnover is high.”*

In using numbers, give them a “real” feel with a frame of reference:

- Over 40,000 people, that’s nearly the population of Troy, NY

Resources

Books:

How to Make a Speech by Steve Allen

It's Not What You Say, It's How You Say It by Joan Detz

Websites:

www.aphorismsgalore.com (aphorisms, proverbs, quotes)

www.bartleby.com (dictionaries, thesaurus, Strunk's Style Manual)

www.merriam-webster.com (on-line dictionary)