

\$3.00

NEW JERSEY STATE FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS OF GFWC

55 Labor Center Way
New Brunswick, NJ 08901



**LEGISLATION
LETTER WRITING
WORKSHOP
KIT**

Revised March 2013

INTRODUCTION

The New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs (NJSFWC) and the General Federation of Women's Clubs has a long and proud history of involvement in legislative matters. Since its early days, NJSFWC, GFWC and its member clubs have been involved in the passage of numerous laws important to women and children, the environment and safety. In 1906, the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) turned the tide on the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. More than 100 years ago, with fewer members than today, the NJSFWC successfully campaigned against the destruction of the Palisades and for the creation of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission. Both of these and other legislative efforts occurred before women had the right to vote.

During the 2002-2004 NJSFWC administration, members joined forces with the Highlands Coalition, Morris Land Conservancy and the Palisades Interstate Park Commission to secure passage of the Highlands Conservation Act (originally known as the Highlands Stewardship Act). During 2012, members urged Congress to pass the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).

This legislation letter Writing Workshop Kit is designed to assist clubs and members in the writing of effective letters to government officials (both State and Federal). As a reminder, in order for a letter to be written in the name of the NJSFWC, a Resolution must have been adopted by the delegates at a previous NJSFWC Annual Convention. NJSFWC Resolutions adopted at the previous Convention can be found in the subsequent year's NJSFWC Yearbook. A booklet of all Active NJSFWC Resolutions is available for purchase through NJSFWC Headquarters. If you are unsure about a particular Resolution, contact the NJSFWC Legislation/Resolutions Chairman.

A Legislation Letter Writing Workshop is a great DONE IN ONE project that requires minimal preparation and is very easy to do, utilizing this Kit. By incorporating the Legislation Letter Writing Workshop as a meeting's program, the Club is provided with an opportunity to educate the members on a variety of important matters as well as producing a stack of letters ready for mailing. Don't forget to take a few photos of your members writing letters. Using the enclosed Suggested Press Release, send the photos and a press release to the local paper and let your community know what matters to your members. The photos and resulting newspaper articles should also be used in your Scrapbooks, Press Books and/or History Books.

The Legislation Letter Writing Workshop Kit includes the following:

- What is Advocacy?
- How a Bill Becomes A Law and What your Club can do during the process
- The Congressional Legislative Office Structure
- Action Tools and Effective Letter Writing Tips and Sample Action Letter
- Congressional Resources
- Facilitator Workshop Checklist and Workshop Facilitator Outline

NJSFWC Advocacy Letter Writing Kit

What is Advocacy?

Advocacy: to speak for those who have no voice or representation

Effective advocacy works to create a shift in public opinion, money and other resources and to support an issue, policy or constituency Legislative action is an important part of the movement to effect change in policy. By making NJSFWC and GFWC views known to your legislators you can help create laws and secure the funds necessary to influence federal and state legislation. Your efforts become a part of the larger struggle devoted to ensuring that legislation is passed to positively impact targeted citizens. This guide is designed to enhance the efforts of NJSFWC members in becoming active participants in the democratic process.

All it takes to be an advocate:

- 1 minute to leave a telephone message to your legislator
- 3-5 minutes to photocopy and share an article of interest with your legislator
- 5-10 minutes to send a letter or email
- 10-15 minutes to visit a legislative website to get more information about an issue

Steps to effective club advocacy

1. Identify the Issue.
2. Identify supportive GFWC and NJSFWC resolutions dealing with your issue.
3. Motivate your members support to write letters.
4. Understand how a bill becomes a law.

Advocates should be able to communicate a clear and concise message in a number of different formats: letters, e-mails, phone calls, and meetings with public officials.

The message needs to: (EPIC)

Engage the Audience: Choose information and language that will resonate with the legislator and help her/him understand the issues as it relates to you and NJSFWC.

State the **P**roblem: Clearly and concisely define the issue. Think about:

- What is the problem?
- Who is affected by the issue?
- Why does the issue need to be addressed at this time?
- How are children, families, and the community being affected?

- What local data can you provide to emphasize how the problem is affecting the community?

Inform Others about Potential Solutions: Be prepared to suggest and discuss practical solutions. Consider your specific recommendations, the evidence you have to support them, and how these solutions might be funded

Call to Action: The action requested should be specific.

How a Bill Becomes a Law and What Your Club Can Do During the Process

Origins of Legislation

- Suggestions for legislation can come from anyone – lawmakers, interest groups, constituents. However, legislation can only be officially introduced by a Member(s) of Congress or, in NJ, an Assemblyman/woman or a State Senator. The member who introduces the bill is known as the chief sponsor of the bill.

Committee Assignment

- Once a bill is introduced, it is assigned a number and referred to a specific committee. A subcommittee may consider the bill before any action is taken by the full committee. Committees ‘mark up’ or make changes to the bill, hold public hearings allowing testimony for or against the bill, and are responsible for deciding whether to ‘report’ or ‘not report’ a bill to the House or Senate floor. Bills not reported die in committee and no further action is taken. Bills reported to the floor are scheduled for floor action.

What Can You Do During the Committee Process?

- *Contact your legislators and request that they co-sponsor the bill. The more co-sponsors a bill has, the more likely it is to gain support and move through the legislative process.*
- *Develop an “action alert” for your club members and partners indicating how they can get involved in supporting or opposing the legislation. Include directions to contact legislators and position of the organization.*
- *Once a relevant bill has been introduced, contact members of the committee to which it is assigned and make them aware of your opinions.*

Chamber Floor

- Once a bill is reported from committee, it moves to the floor of the respective chamber, either House or Senate. At this time rules and restrictions are placed on the bill limiting the time of debate, including what types and how many amendments may be added to the bill. Members then debate the bill and take a vote. If the bill passes one chamber, i.e. the Senate, it then moves to the House, or vice versa. Once a bill passes through one chamber, it undergoes a similar process in the other chamber.

What can you do when there is debate and a vote on the floor?

- *Contact your Congress or State House members to communicate your support of or opposition to the bill and any amendments.*

Conference Committees

- If there is a substantial difference between the bills passed by each chamber, then a conference committee is convened to resolve the differences. The conference committee is composed of Members from each chamber. Once the committee produces a final bill, known as a 'conference report,' the bill is then sent back to both chambers to be voted on again. Once the bill leaves the conference committee, it cannot be amended or changed. If both chambers approve the bill, it is sent to the president.

What can you do when the process starts over in the other chamber?

- *As the process starts over in the other chamber, continue efforts at the committee, subcommittee and full chamber levels.*

The President

- When Congress sends a bill to the President, the bill will either be signed or vetoed. If the bill is signed, it becomes law. If the bill is vetoed, it goes back to Congress for a vote. A two-thirds majority vote is required to override a presidential veto and enact a bill into law.

What can you do when the bill goes to the White House?

- *Contact the White House to voice your support or opposition to the bill and call for Presidential approval or veto.*

The Congressional Legislative Office Structure

To learn who your House of Representative member is visit www.house.gov and type in your zip code. To learn who your Senators are visit www.senate.gov and choose your state. If you do not have access to the internet, call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121.

Because representatives are elected by constituents, constituents concerns are of the utmost importance to elected officials. The best way to enact legislative change is to effectively communicate your concerns to your representative. The most successful advocacy techniques involve personal and direct contact with your Member of Congress. Be sure to contact YOUR legislator. Your legislator works for you so make your concerns known!

An additional way to familiarize yourself with the legislative process is to have a basic understanding of how your Member of Congress' office is structured. Knowing the role and function of individual staffers will help you when communicating with your representative.

Chief of Staff

- Supervises all aspects of the Member's office
- Reports directly to the Member of Congress

Legislative Directors

- Supervises legislative staff
- Monitors legislative schedule
- Makes recommendations to the Member on legislative issues
- Keeps the Member updated on all legislative issues

Legislative Assistants

- Focus on specific issues such as women's issues, appropriations, etc.
- Meet with constituents when member is not available
- Are experienced in issues and workings of Capitol Hill

Scheduler

- Creates and maintains the schedule for the Member of Congress. Ask to speak with the scheduler when calling to make an appointment with your representative
- Makes travel arrangements
- Takes requests for speaking engagements, etc.

Press Secretary/Communications Director

- Maintains communication between the Member, his/her constituency and the general public
- Promotes the views and position of the Member on various issues

Caseworkers

- Respond to constituents requests, which often includes contacting government agencies on the constituent's behalf (Social Security issues, passport issues)
- Many caseworkers are located in district or state offices

Action Tools

WRITE A LETTER

Letters are an effective way to communicate your views to your legislator. Because of security measures, mailed letters are often delayed almost two months before they reach a Member's office, therefore consider faxing your letter or mailing it to your legislator's District Office (it just takes a few letters on an issue to get noticed in the District Office). A letter is still an effective way to communicate with your legislator about an issue that is not time-sensitive, but emails and faxes are faster and reach your Member without delay. The format for postal letters, emails and faxes are the same. By following this format you can express your perspective and personal opinion on an issue, encourage your representative to vote for or against pending legislation, and inform your legislator of your intention to follow his or her vote on an issue.

Tips:

- Begin your letter by stating that you are a constituent and a member of the NJSFWC and the GFWC.
- Clearly state your position and the position of our organization. State exactly what you want your legislator to do: so-sponsor a bill, vote for or against a bill. If there is a bill number, refer to it by number...not just the title of the bill.
- Keep the letter focused and only address on issue
- If you have any personal experience, tell that story.
- Include any statistics about your issue.
- Be brief – try to keep the letter to one page, and no more than 2 pages.
- Use your club letterhead, if you have one, or your own personal stationary. Be sure to include your own address and phone number and email so your legislator can contact you.
- Request a reply. You will want a hard copy of your legislator's position on an issue

EMAIL

Email allows you to communicate with your representatives quickly and easily. Follow the same guidelines for writing and remember to keep the email brief and focused. Keep in mind representatives receive many emails a day.

FAXING

Faxing is an excellent way to contact your representative and inform him/her about your concerns regarding a bill or issue. Like email, the legislator will receive your letter quickly, but a fax will also allow you to better format your letter and use your shelter or organization's letterhead. When faxing representatives, follow guidelines outlined for letter writing and email.

Tips for Communicating with Legislators

Do Your Homework

- For legislation, know the bill number and what the bill is about.
- For funding issues know how much is needed and what it is for.
- Be able to describe why the issue is important to you and to your community.
- Use personal stories to illustrate your facts – they will be remembered.

Keep Your Message Simple & Specific

- Discuss one issue at a time. If you have more than one concern, write about it or discuss them at a different time.
- Include a specific request in your discussion or letter.
- When meeting with legislators, have something in writing to leave with them.
- Always include your name and contact information.

Tell the Truth

- You will become a valuable resource. If you don't, you will lose all credibility as will your issue.
- If you're asked a question that you can't answer, say so. Promise to get the information later, and do it!

Remember, There is Strength in Numbers and a Unified Voice

- Identify people and groups who support your issue.
- Work in collaboration with others whenever possible. There is always enough work to go around.
- When disagreements arise work them out among yourself and present a united front to the legislature.

Don't Be Threatening or Confrontational

- These issues are personal.
- Accept that you will not convince everyone on every issue.
- It is more important to keep lines of communication open.

Think Big – But Know Your Bottom Line

- Politics is the art of compromise.
- Be prepared to discuss those things that are negotiable and stick to those that are not.

Mind Your Manners

- Thank legislators for their interest and time.
- Thank legislators for their support if appropriate.

Letter Writing Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- Identify yourself as a member of the NJSFWC and give your address (especially if it is a NJ legislator) - a letter will be given serious consideration if you are a constituent.
- Be specific - Clearly illustrate your support or opposition for the bill, as it pertains to the NJSFWC and/or GFWC Resolutions
- Illustrate your position with local examples - legislators and staff appreciate how legislation affects local constituents; let them know.
- Offer to serve as a resource - highlight your expertise or community involvement.
- Be timely - write when the issue is current.
- Spell your legislator's name correctly.
- Write legibly or type your letters.
- Clearly state your position and refer to bills by name or number
- Stay on one topic in the opening sentence. **If there are a number of bills, write a separate letter for each.**
- Raise questions: a well-formulated question will usually get a response.
- Keep it short. One page is best! Use two pages only if necessary for clarity and completeness.
- Be timely. Write before decisions are made and action is taken. But don't write too long beforehand--a letter six months before a vote will probably be forgotten.
- Use your name and address on both the envelope and the letter. This helps staff in replying, and it identifies you as a constituent. (For e-mail, include your full name and address at the end of the e-mail.)
- Write to thank your legislators when they take an action you agree with. It's surprising how few letters of thanks are received on Capitol Hill. If a staff member is particularly helpful, thank him or her, too--or mention your gratitude in your letter to your legislator.

Don't:

- Don't be argumentative or confrontational.
- Avoid jargon and complex medical terms.
- Don't make threats such as "don't count on my vote next election if you don't ..."
- Don't misrepresent your position - decisions should be based on sound data and accurate facts.

Keep it Simple

Many Political Action Committees recommend a three-paragraph letter structured like this:

1. Say why you are writing and who you are. List your "credentials." (If you want a response, you must include your name and address, even when using email.)
2. Provide more detail. Be factual not emotional. Provide specific rather than general information about how the topic affects you and others. If a certain bill is involved, cite the correct title or number whenever possible.
3. Close by requesting the action you want taken: a vote for or against a bill, or change in general policy.

Addressing Members of Congress

To Your Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
(Room #) (Name) Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator _____:

To Your Representative:

The Honorable (full name)
(Room #) (Name) House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative _____:

Identifying Legislation

Cite these legislation identifiers when writing to members of Congress:

House Bills: "**H.R.** _____"

House Resolutions: "**H.RES.** _____"

House Joint Resolutions: "**H.J.RES.** _____"

Senate Bills: "**S.** _____"

Senate Resolutions: "**S.RES.** _____"

Senate Joint Resolutions: "**S.J.RES.** _____"

Sample Action Letter

Date
The Honorable (Full Name)
Office Number and Building Name
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator (Last Name) or Representative (Last Name):

As a member of the New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs of GFWC (NJSFWC), the oldest and one of the largest volunteer women's organizations in the state, and also a member of the (insert your local club's name), I am writing to you to address my support for (insert name of legislation and the bill number).

At the (insert year) NJSFWC Annual Convention, delegates representing the 8,500 members of the NJSFWC approved a Resolution in support of (bill number).

Insert language from the Resolution

This language is what can be found in the "Whereas" sections of the Resolutions.
NOTE: the full language of each Resolution can be found in the NJSFWC Yearbook, in the minutes from the Convention. Also, copies of each Resolution to be proposed for adoption are hard mailed to club Presidents in March of each year.

(Insert information, statistics and or describing the need for the issue/programs in your community or in New Jersey)

As a concerned constituent, I ask that you support passage of this legislation, and that you notify me in writing of your position on this issue.

Thank you in advance for your action.

Sincerely,

(Your Name)
Your Address

PHONE CALLS

Phone calls are the easiest and more time efficient ways to contact a legislator on an issue. When an urgent matter arises, nothing attracts the attention of a legislator more than tying up the office phone lines.

Tips for Phone Calls:

- Ask to speak to the staffer working on your issue.
- Identify yourself as a constituent and a NJSFWC and GFWC member.
- Be brief and specific.
- Be courteous and polite.
- Offer to send information you have on the subject so the staffer can be better informed on how the issue affects the community.

THANK YOU LETTERS

Not only is it important to contact your representative when an issue arises that concerns you, it is also important to thank your representative for voting a certain way, speaking up on an issue important to you, or even attending an event on the issue. Showing a representative your appreciation for his or her effort is a great way to build a relationship and let the legislator know the voting constituency supports his or her decisions.

Tips for Thank You Letters:

- Begin your letter by identifying yourself and NJSFWC and GFWC.
- Make clear what exactly you are thanking your legislator for – supporting a bill, making a speech, attending an event.
- Remind the legislator why this issue is important to the constituency and why his or her support is necessary.
- Now that the legislator has done something for you, offer to do something in return, such as providing resources or educating staffers.
- Be sure to include all your contact information in your letter.

RESOURCES

New Jersey Government:

Official State Website www.state.nj.us/

Online Legislature: www.njleg.state.nj.us/

Tracking Congressional Legislation

- Website Resources
 - Thomas: <http://thomas.loc.gov>
This website is the most comprehensive site for congressional information. It contains the full text of bills, bill summary and status, hearing testimony, recorded notes, and committee reports.
 - Congressional Record: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html>
The Congressional Record is the official record of the proceedings and debates of Congress. It is published daily when Congress is in session. It provides daily

summaries of action in each chamber, committee hearings, bills introduced, bills signed and a schedule of committee meetings for the following day.

- Washington Post: <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

At this site in 'Today Congress' you will find pertinent information on any action items that will happen in Congress on that day.

- Telephone Resources

- Daily Calendar Information: The Cloakroom
- Both Senate and Republican Parties provide recorded messages about the floor proceedings in both the House and the Senate.
- Senate Democratic: (202) 224-8541 and Senate Republican (202) 224-8601
- House Democratic: (202) 225-7400 and House Republican (202) 225-7430
- Legislation Status: The Office of Legislative Information on Capitol Hill responds to telephone inquiries regarding current legislation. A staff member can give you information such as the status of certain legislation, bills introduced by a specific member of Congress or bills introduced on a given subject – 202-225-7400

FACILITATOR WORKSHOP CHECKLIST

FACILITATOR:

The workshop facilitator can be the Club Legislation or Program Chairman. If your Club does not have a Legislation or Program Chairman, any other officer can conduct the workshop. Use this checklist and the workshop outline on the next page as a guide for conducting the workshop.

RESULTS OF WORKSHOP:

- Legislative information shared with membership
- Letters ready for mailing
- OPTIONAL: Photos and a press release for the local newspaper-Ask your Club's Communications Chairman or the member responsible for photographing Club activities & projects to take a few photos of members writing letters and/or the person mailing the letters. Don't forget to give a few photos and the press article to the member responsible for creating your Club's Scrapbook, Press Book and/or History Book.

TIME NEEDED TO CONDUCT WORKSHOP:

The workshop will take 45-60 minutes to complete.

WORKSHOP SET-UP:

- Tables with flat writing surfaces
- Comfortable chairs
- Basket or box to act as "mailbox" for completed letters in their addressed envelopes
- OPTIONAL: The Workshop Facilitator can utilize a flip chart to highlight specific points made during the program. It is recommended that the Workshop Facilitator place the highlighted points on the flip chart before the program begins.

HAND-OUTS/TOOLS FOR EACH WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS:

- White writing paper and legal-sized envelopes
- Pens (Black or Blue)
- Notepads or scrap paper for note taking
- Letter Template and Suggested Sentences
- Effective Letter Writing Tips
- Appropriate NJSFWC Resolution and/or text of legislation to be addressed
- NJ Congressional Delegation & Other Important Contacts List
- Stamps

FACILITATOR WORKSHOP OUTLINE

- Advise your members the purpose and goals of the workshop:
 1. To share information about (insert topic of legislation/NJSFWC Resolution)
 2. To share tips on effective letter writing
 3. To provide an opportunity for members to write letters
 4. Completed letters ready for mailing
- Using information from the NSJFWC Resolution, or the text of the actual legislation, provide participants with information about the issue.
- Before letter writing begins, review “Effective Letter Writing Tips”. Ask members to follow along with the hand-out provided:
 1. Use proper salutations.
 2. In 1st paragraph, tell the addressee who, what & why
 - WHO – Name of your Club with the number of members; Club’s membership in NJSFWC and GFWC with their respective membership numbers
 - WHAT – State the Bill number and bill title along with the action requested from the addressee
 - WHY – Describe in a sentence or two the importance of the action to you and your Club
 3. In next paragraph or two, provide more details and a further explanation of why you are requesting their support. Re-read the “whereas” sections of the Resolution.
 4. As you close the letter, restate the action being requested.
 5. Provide your name, address and phone number and email address, if you have that.
- Ask if there are any questions and advise members you are available to answer any questions they may have as they write their letters
- Give members 15-20 minutes to:
 1. Read materials and make any notes for their letters
 2. Write letters and address envelopes
 3. Deliver completed letters to a designated spot for stamps and the "mail box"
- Thank everyone for their attention and participation. Remind each member to report all responses received from the legislators.

SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

CLUB HOLDS LETTER WRITING WORKSHOP REQUESTING LEGISLATORS SUPPORT FOR

The members of the GFWC Woman's Club of _____ (*insert the name of club*) held a Legislation Letter Writing Workshop on and wrote letters to ask their representatives to support _____ (*insert Title of Legislation and Bill number*).

(Insert specific information about the legislation found in the Resolution or the text of the legislation and how the issue in question directly affects your community.)

Founded in 1894, and currently comprised of 225 clubs and 8500 members throughout the state, NJSFWC established the New Jersey College for Women in New Brunswick in 1918, now Douglass Residential College of Rutgers University. Among many other achievements, the efforts of the NJSFWC led to the formation of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission to oversee the preservation of the Palisades. The Federation is a member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the oldest nonpartisan, nondenominational women's volunteer service organization in the world. Opportunities are provided to women in education, leadership training and community service through participation in local clubs, enabling members to make a difference in the lives of others, one project at a time.

For more information about the local club or any of its projects, please contact _____ (*insert club contact*) at _____ (*insert phone or email contact*). To learn about the NJSFWC, call (732) 249-5474/5485 or visit the Federation website at www.njsfwc.org. For more information on the GFWC, call (202) 347-3168 or visit the website at www.gfwc.org.