



JUNIOR LEAGUE OF
COLUMBUS

FOSTER CARE ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

Foster Care Advocacy Tool Kit

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Introduction

The Junior League of Columbus is committed to supporting youth aging out of the foster care system in Franklin County and the surrounding area. After years of research and assessing the needs of our community and the interests of our members, the League of Columbus settled on the issue of youth aging out of the foster care system because we believe this is an area where we can have true impact. The Junior League of Columbus' new Signature Project, Bridging the G.A.P. (Guide. Advocate. Provide.), aims to provide support to these youth, build up the capacity of the systems surrounding them, and provide a cooperative community response to their needs.

When youth in foster care turn 18, they are no longer part of the foster care system, and many find themselves living alone, without the support, resources, and guidance of a stable family or other caring adults in their lives. Each year in Ohio alone, close to 1,000 youth transition out of the foster care system without permanent, supportive placements. The Junior League of Columbus is working diligently to find ways to guide, advocate, and provide for our local youth in need. Through building strong relationships with local partners that serve this population, and working with legislators and lawmakers to strengthen support for these youth, the Junior League of Columbus plans to marshal our resources and varied talents and expertise to promote healthy and successful transitions for these youth out of the foster care system.

This advocacy toolkit was designed to help members of the Junior League of Columbus to engage in the political process to advocate for youth in our communities who left the foster care system without a permanent placement. This guide will cover several forms of advocacy engagement including letter writing, in-person meetings and testimonials, as well as how to make a phone call to a legislator and how to use your social media accounts to advocate for change. We can use the platform of the League and the weight our reputation carries to advocate for the youth of Central Ohio who most need our voices to help elevate their own.

How a Bill Becomes a Law

A bill is a formal, written legal instrument introduced by a member of the General Assembly to enact, amend, or repeal a state law¹. Any legislative member can propose a bill but members need to be made aware of issues in the community before they will propose changes in legislation. Legislators will meet with community members, concerned citizens, and issue advocates to learn about specific issue areas and/or areas they are interested in specifically. These meetings help inform the legislators on what changes need to be proposed through legislative action and are essential to the law making process. Once a legislator decides to act on an issue, they will work with the Legislative Service Commission (LSC) to draft the language of the bill. The draft language of the bill will then be reviewed by the member as well as any groups or organizations the member is working with to create the bill. Once a draft bill is agreed upon by the members, advocacy groups, and LSC, the proposed bill will be introduced to either the House or the Senate.

Each proposed bill will receive three considerations in the proposed arm of the legislature. First, the bill is reviewed by either the House or the Senate, depending on which member proposed it. Second, the bill will be referred to the Rules and Reference Committee which will review the language and make a referral to a specific standing committee depending on the contents of the

¹ The Ohio Legislative Service Commission. "A Guidebook for Ohio Legislators." Available at: <https://www.lsc.ohio.gov/documents/reference/current/guidebook/17/Chapter%202.pdf>.

bill. Some examples of standing committees include Finance, Health, and Primary and Secondary Education². These standing committees are responsible for: holding public hearings on the bill, making amendments to the bill language, and defeating or favorably reporting the bill back to the House or Senate floor. Finally, once the bill language is complete and voted favorably out of the designated standing committee, the language will be presented on the House or Senate floor and members will be asked to vote 'Yay' or 'Nay' to pass or defeat the bill. Once the bill passes the first house, it is sent to the second house to repeat the same process. So if the bill is originally proposed in the House, it will be sent to the Senate if it is approved. Then the senate will repeat the three-consideration process, make any amendments deemed necessary, and send the agreed upon version of the bill language back to the original house for final approval or changes. Once the final language is approved by both houses, the bill goes to the Governor for signature or veto.

This process can take a significant amount of time. The legislative calendar starts on January 4 and ends on December 31 of the same calendar year. Any legislation proposed during the calendar year that does not complete the process must restart the whole process again one the new legislative year begins.

How to Correspond with Members of the Ohio House of Representatives or the Ohio Senate

This is one of the most important things you can do to help advocate for foster youth and youth aging out of the foster care system in Ohio. Elected officials have the power to propose and pass new legislation, make changes to existing bills, and allocate resources for special populations in need of support from the state. While speaking with an elected official may seem intimidating, these individuals are elected to serve their constituents and are expecting to hear from the people they serve. The areas they focus on are a direct result of the work of advocates across the state who reach out and provide guidance and education on a number of different topics including foster care and the needs of foster youth transitioning out of the system. These relationships are essential and this is an area where the Junior League can play an important role in advocating for the most vulnerable members of our society.

How to Start

There are several ways to reach out to your congress member but first, you must do the work to figure out who represents your area. The following link provides basic information about your region of the state and who your representatives and senators are.

<https://www.ohiohouse.gov/>

<https://www.ohiosenate.gov/senators>

<https://www.congress.gov/members?q={%22member-state%22:%22Ohio%22}&searchResultViewType=expanded>

Ensuring that you are reaching out to the US Senator/Representative and/or Ohio Senator/Representative from your area is important because they are elected to specifically represent your part of the state and are paid through your taxes. Emphasizing your location and

² Ohio House Committees. Available at: <https://www.ohiohouse.gov/committees>.

connection with your representative will help to gain interest from the member and encourage them to be more responsive.

Reaching Out

As far as how to reach out to your Congress members, there are several ways that are best. You can either reach out to schedule an in-person meeting with the member and/or their staff, you can write a letter and/or email expressing your thoughts/concerns, or you can make a phone call to your member.

In-Person Meeting

In order to request an in-person meeting, you will want to call your member's office and schedule a time to come to Columbus or meet the person at one of their district offices. Members located outside of Columbus will spend a significant amount of time travelling back and forth between the capital and their home districts. So you may need to be flexible with your schedule in order to find a meeting time that works.³

Some tips for requesting a meeting:

1. Introduce yourself and the Junior League of Columbus.
2. Include information about where you live and how you are connected to the member's home region.
3. Ask for the amount of time you would like to meet with the member (30 minutes, 1 hour, etc.) but know that they may have limited time available to meet with you.

Tips for the meeting:

1. Many legislators travel frequently and may not be available to meet with you. However, they will often have a staffer or legislative liaison meet with you. This is normal.
2. Being prepared and bringing materials to share during the meeting is essential. You will want to be clear with what you are advocating for and have data to back up what you are saying.
3. Don't make up answers if you aren't sure. If you are asked a question you don't know the answer to, be honest and let the person know you will figure out the answer and follow up with them.

After the meeting:

1. Always follow up an in-person meeting with a thank you note to the legislative member and to the person you met with (if you didn't meet directly with the member). You can typically get the member's mailing address online (<https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/>) or from their business card during your visit. Make sure to thank them for their time and consideration.
2. Follow up with the legislative member and/or the person you met with to answer any questions you were unsure of during the meeting or any materials or information you said

³ National PTA. "Conducting Meetings with a Decision Maker." Available at: <https://www.pta.org/home/advocacy/advocacy-resources/Advocacy-Toolkit/Conducting-a-Visit-with-a-Member-of-Congress>.

you would send later. This can include any materials or information about the Junior League or any information about our projects or advocacy areas.

Writing a Letter

Legislators receive hundreds of letters every day from their constituents. So it is important that you write a letter that will stand out. When you are writing on behalf of the Junior League of Columbus, it is important to explain the personal connection you have with the efforts of the league and the way the league directly serves the local community. Local stories and personal accounts usually attract more attention and are more likely to be read. However, you can also make an impact by sending a large quantity of letters supporting the same cause. If you are not comfortable writing a personal letter, you can use the form letter attached in the appendix to help guide your message. When a significant number of constituents join forces and all send letters about a particular topic, this is noticeable and can have a big impact.

Please feel free to utilize the following tips⁴ for writing your letter and turn to the appendix at the end of this document for a legislative letter template you can use to start.

1. How to Address Your Letter.
 - a. The Honorable Jane Doe
Ohio Senate
1 Capital Square
Columbus, Ohio 43215
 - b. The Honorable Jane Doe
Ohio House of Representatives
77 S. High St.
Columbus, Ohio 43215
2. Use the Junior League of Columbus letterhead. This can be accessed through the Marketing and Operations team or feel free to use the legislative letter template in the appendix which includes the letterhead.
3. Use the Proper Salutation.
 - a. Ohio House of Representatives – “Dear Representative Doe”
 - b. Ohio Senate – “Dear Senator Doe”
4. Introduce yourself, your role in the League, and the mission of the Junior League of Columbus. Be clear and concise. You want to provide information about who you are and what our organization represents but you don’t want to spend too much time introducing yourself. It is also a good idea to include information about what part of the member’s district you live in.

⁴Ohio Children’s Alliance. “Writing Your Legislator: A Guide.” Available at: https://e8e272e2-f157-4a92-8a35-61e24e748486.filesusr.com/ugd/a395ee_caaf50276e694ff58c864606a7b3047f.pdf.

5. Focus on Key Points and Stay Away from Lots of Data. Try to limit your letter to one page and include only the most important data points to make your argument. Talking points and data are important, but we want you to express your unique perspective as well to catch the member's attention and make your letter memorable. Make sure any criticisms are respectful and productive.
6. Use relatable language. Stay away from specific jargon or terms that would not be understood by the general public. Common terms and simple language will ensure your points will be easy to follow and comprehend no matter the member's experience or background knowledge on the topic.
7. Make your letter personal. While many people may want to follow the basic outline provided in the legislative letter template, it is also important that you find a way to make the letter your own. The most memorable letters are those that include stories or personal accounts. Talk about your experience in the League or an event you volunteered for where you got to learn about foster care.
8. Provide a specific ask, if possible. A call to action is a great way to end a letter to a legislative member and can give them inspiration to act immediately. It is important to advocate for ideas but asking the member specifically to champion an issue, write a bill, or vote favorably for an already existing bill gives them tangible next steps after reading your letter.
9. End the letter with a thank you! We want to make sure we are thanking the legislative members for their time and consideration. It is important to acknowledge their commitment to helping youth in Ohio and encourage them to reach out to you if they have any questions or want to talk more. You can include the JLC website information, your personal email, or the email for the Community Impact Council.
10. Include the appropriate contact info. This should include your first and last name, the name of the Junior League of Columbus, and either your personal phone and email, or the phone and email for the Community Impact Council leadership.

Making a Phone Call

Not everyone will have the time or ability to meet with their legislators in person but would still like to speak directly to them about their area of interest. Phone calls to legislators can be a great tool for those wanting to make their voice heard in the convenience of their own home. A call also allows you to speak directly to the legislator or a representative from their office and answer their questions/concerns in real time where writing a letter cannot allow for this same level of interaction and real time conversation. Phone calls are also an excellent tool for advocates when a bill is up for a vote and there is not enough time to organize a letter writing campaign or get a letter in the mail before the vote occurs. A strong show of support with phone calls can use the power of collective action to demonstrate the urgency and/or level of support behind an issue. You can find your local legislator's contact info by visiting the following website:

<https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/>. Feel free to use the following tips when making your phone call:

1. Have a script prepared or a clear idea of what you want to say. You will probably have limited time to speak to the legislator or their representative. You want to be prepared and sound as professional as possible.
2. Introduce yourself and the Junior League of Columbus. It is important to be clear that you are a member of the League but also a constituent from the region represented by the legislator. Legislators are typically most responsive to people they know live in their area.
3. Prepare a specific ask of the member. Similar to writing a letter, you want to use some personal accounts to make your points and share specific and poignant data. Always end the call with a clear call to action so the legislator knows what you would like them to do.
4. Thank the legislator or representative for their time. Always express gratitude to the person taking your call and leave your contact information or the League's contact information for the person if they have any questions.

How to Advocate Using Your Social Media Accounts

Social media can provide organizations and advocates with a massive platform for connecting with others, learning about topics, and reaching out to policy makers to advocate for change. These tools are also easily accessible by most people and are a cost-effective way to connect and promote a cause. The Junior League of Columbus is very active on several social media platforms and members frequently turn to these resources to learn about League initiatives, share ideas, and sign up for upcoming events and volunteer opportunities.

The Primary Options for Social Media Advocacy

- **Twitter:**
 - A platform to share your thoughts with followers in 140 characters or less
 - You can tweet at (@) people/groups; use hashtags (#) to create or join a movement referencing certain subject matter and follow other people/groups to get different viewpoints, learn something new, and follow breaking news and what others are doing; and retweet the posts of others to share the idea or news with your followers
 - The more often you tweet and explore on Twitter, the more your follower base and subject matter will grow—getting your word out to a greater volume of people
- **Facebook:**
 - A platform to share your thoughts with friends and followers. Also has a “group platform” that many organizations use to communicate with other group members or grow support for a certain movement.
 - You can post status updates, web links, announcements, photos, documents, etc.
 - Has a similar hashtag system to Twitter, allowing you to create or join a movement involving certain subject matter.
 - Has more active users than any other platform.
- **LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube:**
 - Good resources for sharing videos, photos, and organizational updates

Remember these social media rules of conduct:

- You can have an opinion; however, be articulate and professional in any tweet, retweet, or post.

- Generally, you should not use personal social media accounts for education business and it is recommended too that you create accounts for professional use.
- If things go negative, it's okay to stop engaging. Consider the impact on your overall advocacy efforts to help make a decision.
- The moment you publish anything on social media, it's out there forever.

Social Media To-Do List

- Follow policy makers at all levels on various social media. Understanding what your federal, state, and local policymakers are saying on social media will help you craft the speaking points and messages you'll need to communicate with them on your issues. Pay attention and track what they're working on; what kinds of things they like to talk/tweet about, and what their positions are.
- Create groups on Facebook. You can do this to build advocacy coalitions for funding increases with lawmakers; build grassroots support; and connect with others throughout the community for reporting/discussing progress⁵

⁵ The National Association of Secondary Schools Principals. "Social Media 101: Using Social Media to Advocate and Influence Policy." Available at: <https://www.nassp.org/social-media-101-using-social-media-to-advocate-and-influence-policy/>.