

The Advocate's Guide to Legislative Action



Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women

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Introduction

The purpose of this legislative action guide for advocates is to offer you the tools and information needed in order to achieve the power and influence necessary to effectively advocate for the issues battered women and their children face. Through effectively joining MCBW members across the state to create a collective voice for battered women and their children, every advocate in Minnesota has the ability to help make meaningful change.

This is why being part of a grassroots organization like MCBW is so powerful. The real power of change is not made at the governmental level but at the grassroots level. Our governmental system is comprised of influential people who can effectively communicating their issues at the policy level. The grassroots advocates who make up the Coalition are people like you who have made the decision to act on their belief that there needs to be change in the system. They are able to communicate the message to their representative that their issue is important and why.

Without the public's input the Minnesota Legislature will not fully know the ins and outs of every issue that is presented during the legislative session. That is why it is so important for people who have expertise or knowledge about an issue to communicate the reasons for either advocating or opposing an issue. As a Coalition of advocates and others who have expertise, we are able to come together to make significant legislative and other public policy changes toward ending violence against women and children.



Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding any of the content of this guide or would like to have a further discussion around any of the policy or system initiatives that MCBW plans to pursue this legislative session please contact us:

Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women
590 Park Street
St. Paul, MN 55103

Phone: (651) 646-6177
Fax: (651) 646-1527
Web: www.mcbw.org

Director of Public Policy and Prevention **Carla Ferrucci**
cferrucci@mcbw.org
Ext. 27



Minnesota State Capitol Contact Information

Who represents me or my program?

If you are unsure of who your representative or senator is, the Minnesota Legislature's web site has a program where you can enter in your address and it will find your legislators for you. It can be found at www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/Districtfinder.asp.

Legislator Mailing Addresses:

Representative (last name)

Minnesota House of Representatives
Room # State Office Building
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155-1298

or

Senator (last name)

Minnesota Senate
Room # Capitol Building
75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155-1606



Legislator Direct Phone Numbers and E-Mail Addresses:

This link will direct you to a web page within the Minnesota State Legislature official website. There you can click on the link that guides you to your specific legislator's contact information—www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/legdir.asp.

Minnesota Congressional Delegation Contact Information

Here is a list of the Congressional Delegates for the State of Minnesota.

U.S. Senate:

Norm Coleman (R)
Amy Klobuchar (D)

U.S. Representatives:

Tim Walz (R-1)
John Kline (R-2)
Jim Ramstad (R-3)
Betty McCollum (D-4)
Keith Ellison (D-5)
Michele Bachman (R-6)
Collin Peterson (D-7)
Jim Oberstar (D-8)



What is Public Policy?

Public policy is the guiding principles or rules established by government that affects the good and welfare of everyone, or a specific group of people within the general public. Legislative advocacy is one of the tools we can use to affect that public policy.

The goal of legislative advocacy is to influence and shape the policies that affect the lives and well-being of those you serve.

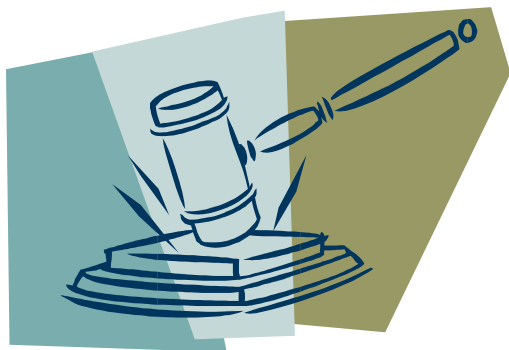
The importance of effective legislative advocacy is to ensure that the women and children who will be affected by policy or legislation are not affected in a negative way but in a way that will ensure their safety and pursuit of a better life.

In politics there is often disagreement on a stance a legislator or group may take on different issues. You must not let differences in opinion drive a wedge between you and those who are there to represent you. Keep in mind that in legislative advocacy there can be no permanent enemies and you must try to work towards establishing intentional relationships built around partnerships.

A partnership with your legislator will give you the leverage you need in order to ensure that you are doing all you can to influence the policies that are going to affect battered women and their children.

MCBW works extensively with members and allies every year to develop an informed legislative agenda that incorporates the knowledge, experience and analysis of battered women and their advocates across the state. The Coalition also develops informational materials to assist in talking about these important issues.

Most often the largest problem in systems change is the lack of knowledge around an issue. Do your part and be an expert that your representative can rely on for advice.



What Is Grassroots Organizing and Why Is It Important?

Grassroots organizing is about engaging people in the political process. It is about starting from the bottom and working your way towards the top. Grassroots organizing shapes public policy with intentional relationship building and influencing public opinions through community mobilization.

Anyone can be a part of a grassroots organization effort. Such efforts are comprised of everyday people who have commonalities in the policies they are seeking to change. It is about organizing to affect the systems and institutions that govern our daily life.

A grassroots organizing effort begins with assessing the current policy and what about that policy we are seeking to change. Any campaign can succeed if it has the support of an entire community. As part of the MCBW community, we will work together through mobilization efforts and creating awareness campaigns, you can create a grassroots effort towards systematic and institutional change. Legislative advocacy is an important component of this larger effort.

The way in which to be most effective is not through blanket e-mails sent to your legislator or post cards with identical messages but through creative awareness drives and campaigns aimed at highlighting the issue you are trying to organize around. Most importantly, the one-to-one relationships you have with your legislators will ultimately carry the day in effectively changing legislative actions.

People like you and those around you are the real policy makers. Don't let decisions be made on behalf of you be part of the Coalition's legislative development and implementation process. Then engage yourself and others to act and advise those who represent us.

You have the power to make change happen. So act on it. MOBILIZE, ORGANIZE, INTENTIONALIZE. The more you mobilize, organize and intentionalize the relationships you build, the more awareness and power you can create.



Relationship Building

What is the importance of relationship building?

Relationship building is an easy way to influence public policy through legislative advocacy. By intentionally building relationships and trust with your legislators or local policy officials, you can create a working relationship that can offer you leverage when communicating your position on your issue.

How can I build an intentional relationship?

The way to build a relationship is by setting up a meeting or an appointment to speak with the individual you are trying to influence. Access MCBW resources, information and talking points to prepare for an effective conversation with policy makers. This meeting will allow you to understand them, their position on your issue, and allow you to convey the message you are trying to get across. It is an effective way of letting them know what it is you want and why you care so deeply about your issue. A meeting allows you to establish trust with them; it also allows you to become their expert on the topic. Perhaps in the future your legislator will call on you to testify at a hearing or may read part of a letter you have written during a floor debate. By informing them about MCBW, you also ensure that the legislator has access to the Coalition's collective expertise and you open the door for MCBW's lobbyist in their day-to-day work at the State Capitol.

You must create the relationship and build trust in order to have a direct impact on the issue you are advocating for.

Another good way to create an intentional relationship is to invite your legislator to visit your program. This allows them to see first hand the importance of the work you do and how your program is needed in your community.

You can invite legislators to an already scheduled event your program may be hosting, or for a tour. This is an exceptional way in which you can connect your legislator with your work directly. Also be sure to attend Violence Against Women Action Day, the connected legislative training, and to meet with your legislators as part of that event. Don't forget you can never over-establish your relationship. The more you can engage your official with your program and its work, the more effective you will be when trying to raise their



Successful Methods for Achieving Systems Change

Writing Letters:

Writing about a personal story or experience is powerful and very influential. It sets a tone and creates a human element. It is a very effective means of communicating your position. However it can also be very ineffective if done as a blanket or form letter. Please see the example letters on page 16.

Telephone Calls:

Throughout the legislative session, the Coalition may send out calls for action requesting that you contact your legislators. This is only done when a critical vote is coming up. Please answer these calls to action by calling your legislator to let them know your opinion on the issue. A personal phone call from you can have a large impact on the way your legislator votes on your issue if done at the right time and especially if it is part of a larger effort.

Personal Office Visits:

This is a great way to start that intentional relationship that is so key in your role as an domestic violence advocate. This allows you to take your issue directly to your legislator and let them meet you face to face. There is no better way of communicating than face to face. It is the most effective way of adding that emotional element that is so needed when advocating for domestic violence issue. This allows legislators to better understand where you are coming from and why.



501(c)(3) Do's and Don'ts

What can a 501(c)(3) do when it comes to participating in the political process? You have a lot of power within your community. You have the community support, trust, and access to other resources that you can utilize. Exercise your right to be engaged.

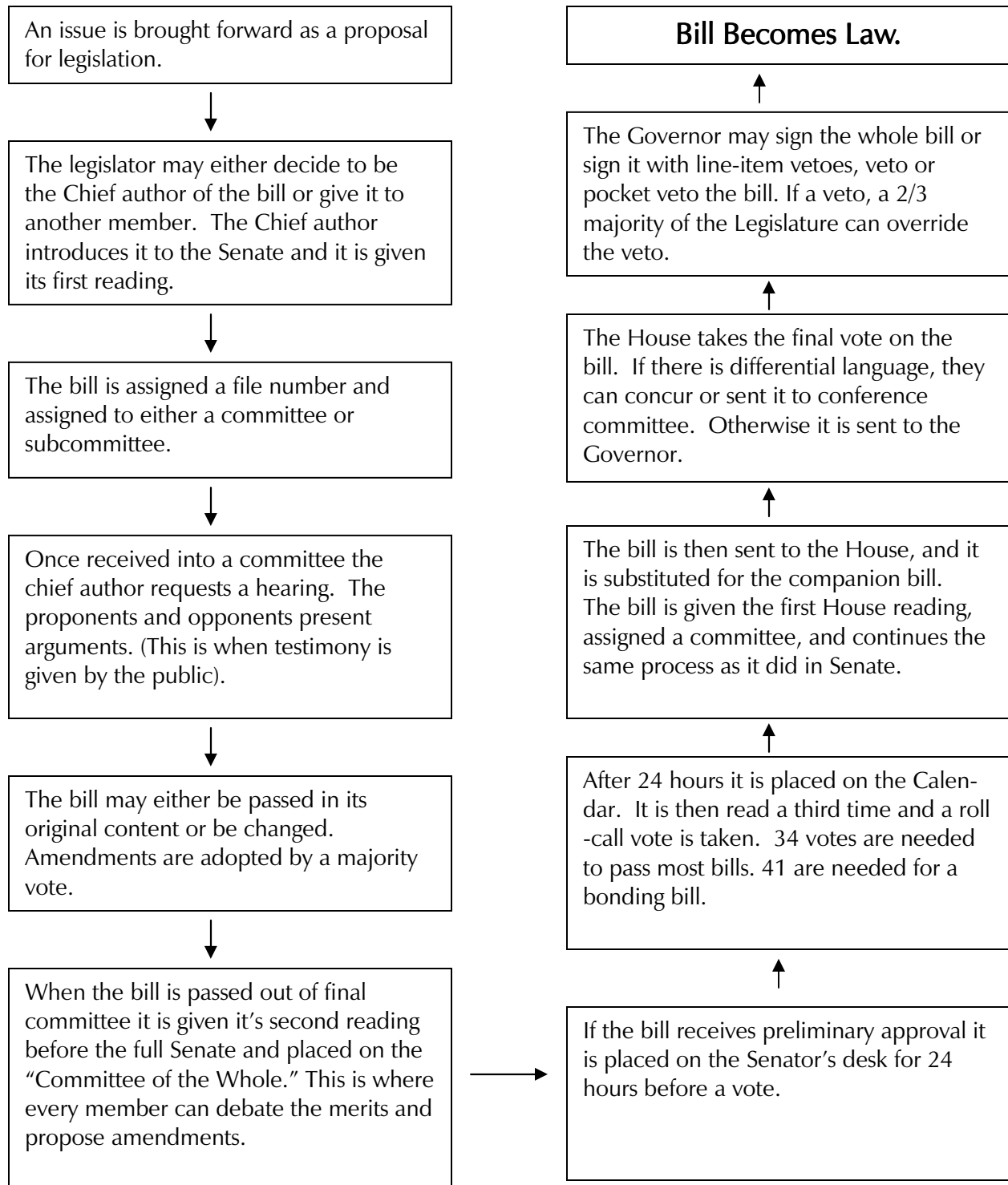
Things you *CAN* do as a 501(c)(3) organization:

- Conduct voter registrations and nonpartisan get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts.
- These efforts must be designed to educate the public about the importance of voting.
- Your effort can not be biased, meaning you cannot support or oppose any candidate or party. You can target low-income populations or communities—this may include communities of color or student populated areas.
- Educate the public on issues and encourage participation in the political process.
- Educate all candidates and political parties on your specific issues.
- Conduct or participate in a nonpartisan candidate forum. (It must be open to all candidates for a particular office, it must be run in a “balanced” way, and include a broad range of nonpartisan candidates.)
- Make presentations on your organizations’ issues to create a community platform, campaign candidates, media, and the general public.
- Work on behalf of a ballot measure.
- Rent or sell mailing lists to candidates at fair market value if made available to all parties.

Things you *CANNOT* do as a 501(c)(3) organization:

- Endorse or oppose a candidate implicitly or explicitly. Contribute money or time for a particular candidate.
- Coordinate activities with a candidate.
- Restrict rental of your mailing list and facilities to certain candidates.
- Set up, fund, or manage a Political Action Committee (PAC), established under section 527 of the tax code mainly for electoral activity.

How a Bill Becomes a Law



Tips for Being an Effective Legislative Advocate

Know about the issue.

Learn to effectively communicate your message in the most direct and precise way as possible. Be clear on what the message is you are trying to convey. Utilize MCBW's resources and talking points.

Understand the political process.

See the *How a Bill Becomes a Law* section on page 13.

Be friendly.

You should have a relationship already established prior to contacting your legislators on a critical vote. Invite them to visit your program prior to the beginning of the legislative session.



Present accurate and good arguments.

When presenting your argument know both sides of the argument. Be able to counter any opposing positions and explain why your position makes more sense. Read the MCBW updates sent throughout the legislative session to stay up-to-date and informed so that you can present your case with expertise and precision.

Let your legislators and the media know your position.

Tell them how you feel about the laws and policies that are affecting your program or people you are serving. Follow up with your legislator after your initial contact with them. Don't let meeting with your legislators or the media be a one time effort.

Describe in detail what it is you are trying to accomplish.



Why is the bill needed or how will it change the current law? Legislators will want to know both sides of the argument in order to make the best possible decision. MCBW fact sheets and talking points will assist you in making the strongest case possible.

Make it clear that you are available to help.

Let your legislators know that you can assist with the bill's passage throughout the session. Offer to gather others in your community to testify, to write letters, to make phone calls, etc.

Tips for Writing a Letter to Your Legislator

1. **Address your letter correctly.** If you are writing to a newly elected legislator and the new legislative session has not yet begun, she or he is correctly addressed as “Representative-Elect Smith” or “Senator-Elect Smith.” If the legislator has been re-elected or you are writing a new legislator after the session has begun, she or he may be addressed as “Representative Smith” or “Senator.”
2. **Keep your letter to one page.** Understand that legislators get hundreds of pieces of mail. You can be most effective if your letter is short and precise.
3. **State your issue at the beginning of the letter.** Be right up front on your reason for writing. Let your legislator know your position from the beginning. This sets the tone for your letter.
4. **Keep your letter to one issue.** You don’t want to overwhelm your legislator with several issues at once. Each issue deserves its own letter.
5. **Be honest.** If you have a difference of opinion with the legislator on a position she or he has taken, be honest and state why in a tactful manner. Explain your reason for opposing the position and what you would suggest and why. Remember you are the expert on the issue you are writing about. You are your legislator’s base of knowledge.
6. **Ask for an answer.** If you ask for an answer from your legislator you will most likely get a response. This will keep the lines of communication open. You have then established a relationship.
7. **Consider your timing.** Is your issue up for debate or going to committee? If so, it is best to send your letter right before a decision vote is to be made.
8. **Include your contact information.** Make sure you include your contact information, so that your legislator can address or respond to your letter. Put your information in the body of your letter, as it may be thrown away if left only on the envelope.

Please see the sample letters on pages 16-18.



Sample Letter to a Legislator from a Battered Women's Program

The Women's Crisis Center
P.O. Box 1492
Petersonville, MN 55123
(320) 645-6754

Senator-Elect Julie Johnson
1543 Main Street North
Petersonville, MN 55123

December 1, 2008

Dear Senator-Elect Johnson:

Congratulations on your election to the Minnesota State Senate! You must be very excited about such an opportunity to serve the people in the Petersonville area and those in the State of Minnesota.

I am the Executive Director of the Women's Crisis Center in Petersonville. The Women's Crisis Center is a community-based program that serves battered women and their children in Petersonville and in the whole of Blue Sky County. Each year, almost 1000 women and their children come to the Women's Crisis Center to escape abusive relationships. We provide emergency safe home housing, legal advocacy, criminal justice system intervention, personal support, and children's programs, as well working with Blue Sky County's schools to prevent future harm with anti-violence curriculum.

In 2005, 26 women and 4 children tragically died as a result of domestic violence in Minnesota. Yet, since 2000, crime victim programs have been disproportionately cut over \$5 million by the Minnesota State Legislature. The Women's Crisis Center is already working with a tiny budget of only \$50,000 per year and these cuts have had a negative impact on the work they do to provide safety and promote justice for the women and children who are your constituents.

I invite you to come and visit the Women's Crisis Center so that you can meet some of the families we serve and hear about how domestic violence has affected their lives. In addition, I would be very glad to familiarize you with the work we do to help women and children achieve safety and self-sufficiency. It is crucial that our state legislators understand the importance of the community-based programs that are a lifeline for so many of Minnesota's families who experience domestic violence.

Once again, congratulations! I very much look forward to hearing from you. Please feel free to call me at any time at my direct number, (320) 645-7783 or my e-mail, ksmith@wcrisiscenter.org.

Sincerely,

Kristin Smith
Executive Director

Sample Letter to a Legislator from a Concerned Citizen or Supporter

Veronica Hernandez
1422 West Main Street
Petersonville, MN 55123
(320) 645-6754

Senator Julie Johnson
1543 Main Street North
Petersonville, MN 55123

December 1, 2008

Dear Senator Johnson:

Congratulations on your election to the Minnesota State Senate! You must be very excited about such an opportunity to serve the people in the Petersonville area and those in the State of Minnesota.

I am a resident of Petersonville who is concerned about funding cuts our local battered women's program, the Women's Crisis Center, has received. The Women's Crisis Center is a community-based program that serves battered women and their children in Petersonville and in the whole of Blue Sky County. Each year, almost 1000 women and their children come to the Women's Crisis Center to escape abusive relationships. They provide emergency safe home housing, legal advocacy, criminal justice system intervention, personal support, and children's programs, as well working with Blue Sky County's schools to teach prevent future harm with anti-violence curriculum.

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I urge you to visit the Women's Crisis Center so that you can meet some of the families they serve, hear about how domestic violence has affected their lives, and talk to the staff about the effect that funding cuts have had on such a critical program in our community. It is crucial that our state legislators understand the importance of the community-based programs that are a life-line for so many of Minnesota's families who experience domestic violence.

Once again, congratulations! I very much look forward to hearing from you. Please feel free to call me at any time at (320) 645-7783 or my e-mail, vkampson@hotmail.com.

Sincerely,

Veronica Hernandez

Sample Letter to a Legislator from a Survivor

Ellen McDonald

1567 North Sunnyside Dr.

Petersonville, MN 55123

(320) 645-6754

Senator-Elect Julie Johnson
1543 Main Street North
Petersonville, MN 55123

December 1, 2008

Dear Senator-Elect Johnson:

Congratulations on your election to the Minnesota State Senate! You must be very excited about such an opportunity to serve the people in the Petersonville area and those in the State of Minnesota.

I am a resident of Petersonville who is concerned about funding cuts our local battered women's program, the Women's Crisis Center, has received. The Women's Crisis Center is a community-based program that serves battered women and their children in Petersonville and the whole of Blue Sky County. In 1998, after years of mental and physical abuse by my husband, the Women's Crisis Center helped my children and me safely leave this abusive relationship and attain self-sufficiency. Without this program, I doubt very much that I would be alive today.

In 2005, 26 women and 4 children tragically died as a result of domestic violence in Minnesota. Yet, since 2000, crime victim programs have been disproportionately cut over \$5 million by the Minnesota State Legislature. The Women's Crisis Center is already working with a tiny budget of only \$50,000 per year and these cuts have had a negative impact on the work they do to provide safety and promote justice for the women and children who are your constituents.

I urge you to visit the Women's Crisis Center so that you can meet some of the families they serve, hear about how domestic violence has affected their lives, and talk to the staff about the effect that funding cuts have had on such a critical program in our community. It is crucial that our state legislators understand the importance of the community-based programs that are a life-line for so many of Minnesota's families who experience domestic violence. I would also be very happy to meet with you to talk about how the Women's Crisis Center made a difference in my life and that of my children.

Once again, congratulations! I very much look forward to hearing from you. Please feel free to call me at any time at (320) 645-7783 or my e-mail, ellenmcd@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Ellen McDonald

What If I Want to Testify at the Legislature?

Remember you have the right to testify.

Take advantage of public participation! At times, MCBW will solicit testimony on legislation from our member programs or survivors. Although MCBW may also testify, it is often times more impactful for legislators to hear directly from those most affected by their policy decisions. We ask that you work with MCBW to identify the appropriate hearing, develop your testimony, and provide follow up information to legislators. You are the expert. Remember that by offering to testify you are able to give the emotional factor that you legislator may not have to offer.

Hold a mock hearing with MCBW staff.

This will allow you to feel comfortable with your testimony and your argument. It will also allow for others to offer feedback and let you know how they understood your argument. Coalition staff can also describe the details of how the hearing will work (structure, how to address committee members and the chair etc.)

Call prior to the day of the hearing.

Work with MCBW to ensure that you are put on the agenda. Don't expect to show up the day of the hearing and offer testimony.

Arrive 15-20 minutes early on the day of the hearing.

This will allow you to get a good seat, and check the agenda to ensure that you are on it. Meet with Coalition staff to talk through any last minute information or questions.

Know where your bill is going to be heard.

You can call MCBW or contact the House Public Information Service at (651) 296-2146 or Senate Information at (651) 296-0504.

Be Brief.

State your position and why you are an expert on the issue. Have an MCBW position paper ready to hand out to the legislators. Present your argument in a easily understood manner.

Speak through the Committee Chair.

Address the Chairs as "Madame Chair" or "Mr. Chair."

Offer to help.

Helpful Web Sites

Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women.....	www.mcbw.org
League of Women Voters.....	www.lwv.org
Legislative Information.....	http://thomas.loc.gov
Minnesota Official State Web Site.....	www.state.mn.us
Minnesota State Legislature.....	www.leg.state.mn.us
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.....	www.ncadv.org
National Network to End Domestic Violence.....	www.nnedv.org
United States House of Representatives.....	www.house.gov
United States Senate	www.senate.gov
United States Supreme Court	www.supremecourt.gov
White House	www.whitehouse.gov

