

CONGRESSIONAL LETTER WRITING The Basics



A project of the Senior Stennis Fellows of the Stennis Center for Public Service
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CONGRESSIONAL LETTER WRITING

The Basics

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INTRODUCTION

About the Stennis Center and Senior Stennis Fellows

The Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows program is one of several activities undertaken by the Stennis Center for Public Service to fulfill its mission of developing effective and principled leadership for America's future. Initiated in the 103rd Congress (1993-94), the program brings together a bipartisan group of experienced House and Senate staff members, who spend several months discussing the future challenges of Congress as an institution and the leadership role played by senior congressional staff in meeting those challenges. Each Congress, a group of 24 to 28 staff members are selected competitively for the program.

One of the principal missions of the Stennis Fellows program is to produce a useful result—an ongoing legacy of learning—for those who care about the long-term effectiveness of Congress as a governing body.

Senior Stennis Fellows, those who have completed a Fellowship, continue to be active in promoting the overall goals of the Stennis Center through their sponsorship of leadership development and public awareness programs focused on the legislative branch. For additional information about the Stennis Center and its programs, visit our Web site at www.stennis.gov/.

About this Handbook

This handbook is one of the staff development activities undertaken by the Senior Stennis Fellows and is intended to help legislative correspondents and legislative assistants improve their writing and research skills. We believe it will also be of use to staff members responsible for training and supervising individuals who handle correspondence within a congressional office. The focus of the handbook is on correspondence; however, many resources identified in the document will be useful for other types of legislative writing.

We recognize that each congressional office has its own policies and procedures with respect to handling constituent correspondence. It is not the purpose of this handbook to promote any single approach to correspondence, but rather to provide a very basic foundation upon which young staffers can develop effective written communication skills.

Acknowledgments

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MAIL MATTERS – JUST ASK YOUR BOSS!

One of the most basic acts of civic engagement is to “Write Your Congressman” (or Congresswoman or Senator). As generations of Members and their staffs can attest, writing to Congress is a task that millions of Americans have undertaken with considerable enthusiasm.

Mail is important. It provides an opportunity for the writers to be active participants in the democratic process by communicating their views to elected representatives. It provides an opportunity for Members to feel the pulse of their constituents at those times when they can’t be directly on the scene in their States or districts. Whether the Member and the constituent agree or disagree about a particular topic, the exchange of views itself is a healthy exercise in democracy.

Members value their mail not only because it provides them an opportunity to connect with their constituents, but also because it offers them critical information. The views and experiences shared via correspondence can help shape a Member’s position on current issues, inspire legislative initiatives, and help build the case on behalf of specific proposals.

The quality of the response a constituent receives from his or her representative in Congress leaves a lasting impression—one that has a significant ripple effect as the constituent shares his or her experience with friends and family. It is not at all uncommon for a congressional response to make the rounds at the barbershop or the coffee klatch. Keep in mind that individuals who contact their elected representatives—particularly those who write personal letters—are individuals who are also likely to vote and to influence the votes of others. You want to make a positive impression.

This handbook was developed to help give staff members who are charged with drafting congressional correspondence the tools they need to prepare timely and informative responses. We also hope that legislative correspondents and other staff members will find the handbook useful in building a foundation of basic research and writing skills that will serve them well in performing other legislative work.

OFFICE POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND PREFERENCES

One of the first things you should know is that every office handles constituent correspondence differently. Consequently, the first thing you need to do when assigned to write letters is to learn the policies, procedures, and preferences of your office. The following questions are intended to help guide you in finding out what you need to know to get started:

What does your Member want to see (or not see) in a letter?

This question covers everything from the length and tone of responses to stylistic preferences.

- First and foremost, a Member wants responses to his or her mail to reflect the Member's views, beliefs, and legislative record. A staff member assigned to draft correspondence must become as familiar as possible with the Member's legislative record and with the style (i.e. folksy, erudite, passionate, measured) in which the Member communicates.
- How much detail does the Member want included in the response? One is generally advised to keep a response to less than one page. However, some Members prefer longer and highly detailed responses to the mail they receive.
- Does the Member have strong preferences about the style of the response? For example, are there words the Member does not want used? (More generally, does your office use any particular style manual to assure consistency in capitalization and other grammar points?)
- How does the Member want the constituent to be addressed? Some Members use first names in answering all their mail, while others use first names only if they personally know the writer. Other times, formal addresses are typed in and then stricken to write in a first name.

- How does the Member want to close the letter (i.e. “Sincerely,” “Warmest regards,” etc.)?

Which mail requires a response?

- What is the office policy regarding responding to out-of-State or out-of-district mail?
- What is the office policy regarding responding to form mail, pre-printed postcards, and petitions?

. . . and how soon?

- What is the office policy with respect to turn-around times? Are interim responses routinely sent? At what point must an apology for a delayed response be included?

Which mail requires special handling?

- Are there guidelines for identifying or flagging correspondence that should be brought to the immediate attention of the Member or another staff member?
- Does the office have special procedures or guidelines for dealing with mail from children or from other officials (i.e. congressional colleagues, State government officials)?

What about e-mail?

- Is it the policy of your office to respond electronically to e-mail or to provide a “snail mail” response? Most offices do not respond to e-mail via e-mail; however, a growing percentage do. Responding to e-mail by e-mail raises issues related to record keeping and quality control, so be sure to learn how these issues are addressed by your office before pressing the “send” key. *(For additional information about congressional use of e-mail, see <http://www.cmfweb.org/>, which describes the “Congress Online Project”—a partnership of the Congressional Management Foundation and The George Washington University, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.)*

What are the logistics of the correspondence system in your office?

- What is the system for routing and reviewing correspondence in your office?
- How are multiple letters addressing the same topic handled? Normally, an office develops “form” or “standard” responses for such mail. Who has responsibility for determining whether a letter should receive such a response and assuring the information in the response is up-to-date? Some offices develop “pro” and “con” versions of a letter on a particular topic (not to provide completely different responses, but rather to make it explicit to the constituent that the Member knows which side of the issue the constituent is taking). Other offices prefer to use a single response to proponents and opponents of a particular policy.
- How are single letters covering multiple topics handled? Generally, a staff member will be responsible for a specific list of subject areas and may not be familiar with all of the topics covered in a particular letter.
- Does your boss like to refer to correspondence they have received in speeches or statements and is there a system for gathering the information? Often, a Member will cite passages from letters or refer to the quantity of mail received on a particular topic.

What resources are available to you within your office?

- What subscriptions (i.e. Lexis/Nexis, *Congressional Quarterly* or *National Journal* products), printed or electronic, does your office have and what is the best way to get access to them?
- What records does the office maintain regarding the Member’s past actions and positions? Examples of such records include: legislative files of measures the Member has sponsored or cosponsored; voting records; speeches, statements, position papers, and press releases; previous correspondence; newsletters; and the Member’s Web site.

WHERE TO FIND WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW . . . ABOUT YOUR MEMBER

Your best sources of information about your Member and his or her constituency can be found in your own office, although the following list includes a few external sources as well. In addition to written material, the “institutional memory” of senior staff is an invaluable resource.

General Profiles: These can be found in publications such as “The Almanac of American Politics” published by *National Journal* and “Politics in America” published by *Congressional Quarterly*. In addition, a Member’s Web site will often include a great deal of background information.

Legislative Activities: An office may maintain central legislative files, although, in many cases, such files are maintained by staff members covering specific issues. Information included in such files includes:

- Information about legislation sponsored or co-sponsored by the Member, including introductory statements, fact sheets, summaries, “Dear Colleague” letters, and background information. (You can also do an electronic search on the THOMAS Web site (<http://thomas.loc.gov/>) of measures your Member has sponsored or cosponsored and of statements made by your Member that appeared in the *Congressional Record*.)
- Co-signed letters.
- Press releases.
- Speeches.
- Newsletters.
- Position papers.

Past Correspondence: Most offices maintain central files of responses

to constituent mail, generally covering the previous year or the current Congress. Filing practices vary widely, but often both alphabetical and subject files are maintained. In addition, a library of “form” or “standard” language is usually available.

Voting Records: There are several sources to help you find your Member’s position on recorded floor votes, including the THOMAS Web site and the “CQ Almanac.”

WHERE TO FIND WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW... ABOUT THE ISSUES

There is no shortage of resource material available to Capitol Hill staff. For any given issue, there are a variety of specialized publications and electronic media—some of which is widely available and some of which is available only through subscription. It is not possible to do justice to all of the issue-specific material that is produced. Rather, the sources described below provide a general starting point for pursuing more detailed information about the topics addressed in your mail.

Congressional Research Service (CRS)/Library of Congress: The most comprehensive source of information about issues pending before Congress is the Congressional Research Service. The Congressional Research Service is a non-partisan organization and does not “take sides” on any of the issues it discusses. As such, it is highly regarded as a source of objective information for defining the issues in particular policy debates.

It is well worth your time to participate in the general briefing offered by CRS—which walks staff through the services and products available. To register, call the CRS Program Section (7-7904). CRS also offers briefings about specific issues. Several other CRS resources are worth highlighting:

- **CRS Web site** (www.crs.gov). The Web site contains all CRS issue briefs and reports, which may be downloaded or ordered on-line. It also contains schedules of CRS programs and training, with on-line registration. You may request CRS analysis and information on-line. In addition, the site contains links to general reference materials and links organized by topic.
- **Issue Briefs, Reports, and “Info Packs”.** Issue briefs, as the name implies, are concise, but thorough, descriptions of issues pending before Congress. CRS reports are longer documents on specific topics. “Info Packs,” packaged in bright yellow folders, contain several issue briefs and related material on

broad topics (i.e. education), particularly those about which inquiries are most frequently made. “Info Packs” on processes are also available. See, for example, IP 321 L, “Legislative Research: A Guide to Conducting Legislative Research in a Congressional Office.”

- **Training Sessions.** Early each year, CRS offers sessions on topics that are likely to receive attention in the upcoming year. Each session lasts about 90 minutes and provides an excellent overview of the issues.
- **CRS Request line (7-5700).** The request line is most helpful when you have a very specific, discreet question. You may also use this number to order CRS products by number, order or return books, obtain program and training information, or contact CRS Research Centers.
- **La Follette Congressional Reading Room and CRS Research Centers.** The La Follette Congressional Reading Room is located in LM204 of the Madison Building (7-7100). The CRS Product Distribution Center is located in LM206 of the Madison Building (7-7132). CRS Research Centers are located in B-221 Longworth (5-2030), B-335 Rayburn (5-6958), and Russell B-07 (4-3550). “Info packs,” reports, and issue briefs are available at the centers. The research centers also offer a varied supply of newspapers, magazines, *Federal Registers*, *Congressional Records*, encyclopedias, and other basic reference works. For more detailed information, see CRS Report 98-76 C - “Congressional Resources in CRS Research Centers and the La Follette Congressional Reading Room.”)

THOMAS Web Site/Library of Congress (<http://thomas.loc.gov/>): THOMAS is particularly valuable as a source of information about the content and status of bills introduced in Congress, containing summary and status information about bills from the 93rd through the 107th Congresses. It also contains text from the *Congressional Record* (101st through the 107th Congresses), nominations (100th through the 107th Congresses), treaties (90th through 107th Congresses), and committee reports (104th through the 107th Congresses). The site also provides links to House and Senate Web sites, as well as to executive branch, judicial, state and local, and some non-governmental sites.

House and Senate Web sites

(www.house.gov, www.senate.gov): These sites provide information about the House and Senate schedules and provide links to numerous other sites—including the individual Web sites of Representatives and Senators and House and Senate committee sites.

Newspapers and Other Periodicals: A careful reading of the newspaper can save a correspondent a lot of research time. In addition to providing basic information about issues and recent congressional actions, it often discusses Congress in procedural terms. Other useful publications include:

- **Daily news clips from the State or district.** This not only allows you to anticipate letter subjects, but also frequently includes statements made by your Member.
- **Congressional Quarterly and National Journal.** Both of these organizations issue daily and weekly publications (by subscription) that are focused on activities in Congress. Their weekly publications are indexed at six-month intervals. They issue a number of special publications as well. For example, *Congressional Quarterly* publishes the “House Action Report” (HAR) that provides nonpartisan analyses of weekly activities.

Congressional Record: It is worth looking at the *Record* every day, as it contains information about every action taken by the Congress on the previous day: bills introduced, bills reported, debate of legislation, roll call votes, nominations received, committee hearings held, etc. In the Senate, it is customary for the sponsor of a measure to make an introductory statement explaining the legislation he or she is introducing. Due to space limitations, introductory statements are not generally made for House bills—although members will sometimes use the “Extension of Remarks” section of the *Record* to discuss bills they have introduced.

Committees: House and Senate committees are a rich source of information about the legislation and issues under their jurisdictions. Resources related to committee work include:

- **Web Sites.** Links to committee Web sites can be found on the House and Senate sites (www.house.gov, www.senate.gov). These sites vary by committee, but generally include informa-

tion about hearings and legislation. Some committee sites provide links to related sites or to publications offering more in-depth information about the issues under their jurisdictions.

- **Phone Calls:** Contacting the staff of the committee to which a bill has been referred can often give you the information you need. In addition to being knowledgeable about the specifics of a bill, they may be aware of complaints or comments similar to those expressed by your constituent and can tell you if attempts are underway to address the concern.

A word of advice: Before you place the call, think through what it is you need to know and acquire enough background information to be able to ask clear questions.

- **Committee Reports:** After a committee has marked up a bill and reported it to the House or Senate, it issues a report describing the provisions of the bill, its rationale, and its cost. In most cases, a committee report can tell you just about everything you need to know to answer a letter. Any bill which becomes law will have (as a general rule) three reports: One from the Senate committee, one from the House committee, and a conference report describing the final provisions of the bill, including a discussion of the ways in which the House and Senate versions differed.

The *Congressional Record* lists bills that have been reported and lists the report numbers. These reports can be obtained from the House or Senate Document Rooms. Reports and report numbers are also available on THOMAS.

- **Other Committee Publications:** Often, committees issue other publications that might be helpful. Some committees print committee calendars that list all the legislation referred to that committee. They will sometimes prepare committee prints that go into considerable detail on issues pending before the committee. Committees will frequently issue press releases or legislative summaries of recent actions.

Other Congressional Offices: The information you need may be available from another Member’s office, particularly if the Member introduced the bill in which your constituent is interested.

Congressional Party Organizations: Various Democrat and Republican policy and leadership offices in both the House and Senate provide position papers, fact sheets, press releases, sample letters, issue background papers, and related publications which may be of assistance in responding to constituent correspondence. Links to the Web sites of several of these offices may be found at: <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/legbranch/otherleg.html>. In addition, many of these organizations offer Intranet services to party members.

Executive Agencies & Departments: Many times, constituents will write about actions taken by an executive branch agency, rather than legislation. There are several ways such letters may be approached:

- **“Buck It”:** In some cases, you will want to refer (or “buck”) the letter to the appropriate agency—asking either that they respond to your office or that they respond directly to the constituent. (Many offices have a policy in terms of which approach is preferred.)
- **Find the answer:** Every executive branch department and a number of federal agencies maintain congressional liaison offices. There are many instances in which these liaisons can give you the information you need to respond to the letter. A list of the names and phone numbers of congressional liaison offices is available from the Congressional Research Service (CRS report 98-446 C - “Congressional Liaison Offices of Selected Federal Agencies.”)

Agency Web sites will often have press releases or other information on specific topics. You might want to check the site before or after contacting the congressional liaison.

- **Dealing with regulations:** In dealing with letters which address proposed or final regulations, it is useful to know that the publication included in the *Federal Register* always includes the name and phone number of a person to contact about a specific set of regulations.

Associations and Other Outside Groups: Organizations representing particular groups or interests maintain a great deal of information about the issues that they follow. Their representatives, Web sites, and publications can be useful in helping you understand the source of a constituent's concern and the rationale for proposals to deal with it. Keep in mind, of course, that these organizations represent a specific point of view.

Finding People and Publications: Below are just a few ideas—

- **Directories:** The House and Senate phone directories are always a good place to start, as is the *Congressional Directory* (<http://www.access.gpo.gov/congress/cong016.html>). The *United States Government Manual* (<http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/nara001.html>) contains phone numbers and brief descriptions of the functions of executive branch agencies.
- **House and Senate Documents:** Copies of legislation, committee reports, and public laws are available from the House Legislative Resource Center located in B-106 Cannon (Phone: 6-5200) and the Senate Document Room located in SH B-04 (Phone: 4-7701). Materials may be ordered from the Senate Document Room by calling the recording at 4-1356.
- **The Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance** (<http://www.cfd.gov/>): This publication includes a description of every domestic program for which federal funding is available. It can be helpful in responding to someone who writes, "I want to do this and such. . . Is there any federal funding for such a project?" The catalog is very well indexed, and it is updated regularly. The program descriptions include eligibility requirements, examples of programs that have been funded in the past, a listing of related programs, and a contact person for additional information about the program.
- **Federal Department Budget/Funding Information:** Executive branch departments and agencies generally prepare documents summarizing the President's annual budget proposals for programs under their jurisdictions. These documents generally include a brief description of each program and include information about past funding levels—thus offering a user-

friendlier version of budget proposals than that found in the *Budget Appendix*.

- **Other Web Sites:**

Government Printing Office home page

(<http://www.access.gpo.gov/>)

General Services Administration

(<http://www.firstgov.gov/>), “the U.S. government’s official web portal.”

Federal Register

(http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aces140.html).

General Accounting Office (<http://www.gao.gov/>).

WHERE TO FIND WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW . . . ABOUT THE INSTITUTION

Obviously, there is a lot of information available about particular subjects. By using the information sources listed on the previous pages, you should be able to obtain a more-than-adequate supply of reading material. As important as knowledge about a subject, however, is knowledge about the institution of Congress and its processes. Many letters require little more than a clear explanation of the way Congress works. People generally do not know all the details about what certain actions mean or how much a bill has to go through to become law. This section attempts to offer some pointers about learning congressional procedures.

Learn the basics of how Congress works.

Reading “How Our Laws Are Made” (<http://thomas.loc.gov/home/lawmade.toc.html>) is not a bad place to start. It is true that congressional activity does not always “go by the book,” but exceptions are easier to understand if you know the rules.

The Congressional Research Service provides a one-day course on Congress for new staff, as well as a two-day advanced course that provides more detailed information about the legislative process.

In addition, there are a number of publications that include glossaries of congressional terminology. You might want to check out the glossary section of the Senate Web site (http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/reference/b_three_sections_with_teasers/glossary.htm), which provides short definitions of congressional terminology, including such terms as “Christmas tree bill.” Both the House and Senate Web sites contain a great deal of information about the operations of Congress, as well as numerous links to other sources of this information. The Congressional Research Service has also developed a number of products dealing with congressional procedures.

It is also useful to understand the role of “rules” in governing debate of House legislation. The Web site of the House Rules Committee is a good source of information on the subject. As an example, the docu-

ment, “The Rules Committee: Role and Process,” (<http://www.house.gov/rules/pop0997.htm>) offers a summary of the types of special rules in the House. This document is one of many prepared as part of the Parliamentary Outreach Program (POP), the purpose of which is to educate and advise Members, committees, and staff on the rules and precedents of the House.

Know the difference between authorizations and appropriations.

Be sure you understand the difference between authorizations and appropriations. Briefly, a program must be authorized before it receives any federal money. Most congressional committees are authorizing committees. Although a specific amount of money is authorized for a program, this amount merely indicates the maximum funding level a program **may** receive—not the amount it will receive. The amount it will receive is determined by the appropriations bill, and that amount is almost always lower than the authorized amount. In fact, it is possible that an authorized program will receive no money whatsoever. (See also: <http://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/RS20371.pdf>)

Understand the budget process and basic budget concepts.

The congressional budget process is complex and relatively abstract, in that it deals with broad functional categories of spending as opposed to specific programs with specific funding levels. Budget rules and resolutions, however, have a major impact on what Congress is able to do in terms of aggregate discretionary spending, tax policy, and entitlement programs. For example, over the past two decades, a substantial amount of the revisions made to entitlement programs have been made through the budget reconciliation process. (Entitlement programs are those, such as Medicare, where spending levels are not dependent upon annual appropriations, but rather by the conditions of participation and the benefit levels offered.)

The Congressional Research Service has developed a number of issue briefs on this subject, and the Web sites of the House and Senate Budget Committees contain a great deal of useful background information. Web sites you might find helpful include:

<http://www.senate.gov/~budget/democratic/budprocess.html>
(Budget process/CRS reports)

http://budget.senate.gov/repUBLICAN/reference/cliff_notes/cliffdoc.htm
("The Congressional Budget Process: An Explanation")

<http://budget.house.gov/budgettutorial.htm>
("Budget tutorial")

<http://w3.access.gpo.gov/usbudget/fy2001/guidetoc.html>
("A Citizen's Guide to the U.S. Budget")

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE WRITING

Simply stated, a good reply to a constituent letter is one that is prompt, cordial, and responsive to the issue or concern that inspired the constituent to write.

- Always keep in mind that it is your boss' signature at the bottom of the page. What you say and how you say it will create a lasting impression of your boss in the writer's mind and will have a ripple effect among the writer's family and friends. Your job is to know your boss' views and to convey them accurately and professionally.
- Be as helpful, empathic, and prompt as possible. Your boss cares about his or her constituents, and you should too.
- Pay real attention to the writer. For whatever motives, he or she has gone to the trouble of making contact with your office. Put yourself in the writer's place and try to determine what it is the writer really wants: specific information or action? . . . a sympathetic ear? . . . an assurance that his or her opinions will be considered?
- Make every effort to write in the style of your boss. The constituent should be able to hear your Member's voice in your written words.
- Be courteous and respectful, even if the writer isn't and even if the views of the writer and those of your boss are diametrically opposed.
- Apply the "front-page" test to your writing. In other words, never put anything on paper or in an e-mail that you don't want published on the front page of your boss' hometown newspaper.
- Be concise, and write in clear, simple sentences.
- Avoid the use of acronyms and terms that are not likely to be

familiar to the constituent. Any acronym you use should be written in full when first used. Terms such as “mark-up,” “reporting a bill,” and “conference committee” should not be used unless they are explained.

- Be accurate and up-to-date. Recycling language saves a lot of time, but make sure it hasn’t been overtaken by events. Keep on top of congressional activities and your Member’s work.
- Start developing your own institutional memory. Like old soldiers, legislative issues never die, they just fade away—only to pop up again in six-months’ or six-years’ time. Realizing this, you should maintain copies of your work so that you can refer to it later. In addition, remembering what your Member has done or said in the past can offer you material to flesh out current letters on related subjects.
- Be creative. Imagination and resourcefulness are two of the most important skills a correspondent can develop.
- You will always have plenty of work, so take shortcuts when you can. For example—

If existing language is still up-to-date, is well-written, and has gone out under the Member’s signature in the past, use it.

Another time-saver is to develop standard paragraphs for recurring topics. In building a library of such paragraphs, remember they will most likely be used in responding to multi-topic letters—so keep them as brief as possible and mix up your openings. Avoid things like “As you know, . . .” because nothing is worse than a six paragraph letter—with each paragraph opening with “As you know . . .” The best thing to do is to head straight into the topic. The letter will have an opening, so you need not bother with preliminaries on each paragraph. In addition, you can (and should) include appropriate transitions between issues when you put the paragraphs together in responding to a letter.

- Using enclosures can save you from writing a lengthy explana-

an issue have been interpreted as a request for reading material. Brief comments about the issue, along with an explanation for why you are sending the enclosure, should be included in your response.

- Have on hand some basic writing reference works—a dictionary, a thesaurus, and a style manual. “The Elements of Style” by William Strunk and E.B. White is a classic, but there are many other manuals available to assist you in assuring consistency in the presentation of your writing.

GETTING HELP WITH YOUR WRITING

The general assumption is that congressional staff members bring good writing skills to the job. Consequently, there are few formal training activities aimed at writing in general or letter writing in specific.

Some training is available to Senate staff from the Senate Education and Training Office, located in SH-121 (Phone: 224-7952). The Office offers several writing courses and also maintains a library of videos, CDs, and publications offering writing tips and basic grammar information. Videos, CDs, and publications may be taken out on loan for 2 weeks.

The Office publishes a quarterly schedule of classes, which is distributed to all Senate offices (or you may pick up a copy in SH-121). Some classes offered in the past include:

CRITICAL THINKING: ADVANCED WRITING SKILLS (2-day workshop) – “Good writing is based on clear thinking. This workshop explores the connection between the two. In-class exercise will help you master the thinking skills you need to communicate effectively. These skills include analyzing information, evaluating options, drawing conclusions, organizing ideas and seeing the big picture.”

GRAPPLING WITH GRAMMAR – “Proper grammar helps you communicate clearly and present a professional image. If you are unsure of your grammar skills or simply want a refresher, this is the course for you. We will review basic grammar rules, common grammatical errors, and troublesome words such as *affect/effect* and *its/it’s*.”

PUNCTUATION POINTERS – “Unsure of where the comma goes? Wonder if you need a colon or a dash in a sentence? And what about quotation marks? If you need to brush up on the correct use of punctuation marks, join us for this review.”

WRITE IT RIGHT – “This basic writing course will help you write clearly and concisely so that readers quickly grasp your

APPROACHES TO LETTERS

There is great variety in the mail that finds its way to Capitol Hill, ranging from requests for flags that have been flown over the Capitol to pleas for intervention with federal agencies in dealing with the denial of benefits. The lion's share of correspondence, however, can be generally categorized as "issue mail." This is the type of mail on which this handbook is focused.

At the outset, it is generally wise to review any records available in your office regarding previous contact with the constituent. Such a review will help avoid situations where the constituent receives the exact same response he or she has received in the past and may provide an opportunity to comment on previous exchanges as part of the response to the most recent communication.

What follows are suggestions for how a correspondent might approach various categories of issue mail.

LETTERS THAT MENTION SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

Ask yourself:

- What is the status of the bill?
- Is my boss a sponsor or cosponsor?
- If it is in committee, what is the committee planning to do with it?
- Is there an introductory statement to it, and is the statement helpful?
- Is it similar to anything your Member has done or voted on in the past?
- Would it help if some kind of information were ordered from CRS to send along?

Your **response** will take one of three basic formats:

BASIC - NEUTRAL

(The Member does not have a position on the measure.)

1. Inform the constituent of the status of the legislation.
2. Make a comment about the issue. The comment could relate

to the Member's philosophical view of this type of legislation, cite the Member's past actions on related issues, or describe additional information the Member wants to have before taking a position.

3. Assure the constituent that his or her comments will be helpful to the Member's further evaluation of the measure.

BASIC - AGREE

(The Member and the constituent are on the same side of the issue.)

1. Inform the constituent of the status of the legislation and provide a brief description of its content or intent.
2. State the Member's position.
3. Explain the reasons for the Member's support. Enclose or attach a copy of any supporting statement by the Member, if available.
4. Assure the constituent that the Member will work for its passage. **[SAMPLE LETTERS]** (*Mental Health Parity, Student Aid-Drugs, Elections*)

BASIC - DISAGREE

(The Member and the constituent do not agree.)

1. Inform the constituent of the status of the legislation and provide a brief description of its content or intent.
2. Make a positive comment of some kind—which may be related to the intent or subject matter of the legislation or may refer to the importance of a healthy debate in a democracy.
3. Explain the reasons the Member disagrees with the position of the constituent. **[SAMPLE LETTER]** *Dividend taxation.*

LETTERS THAT MENTION AN ISSUE (BUT NOT SPECIFIC LEGISLATION) OR THAT EXPRESS A GENERAL COMPLAINT)

Ask yourself:

- What is the position of your Member on this issue, or what position has he or she taken on this or similar issues in the past?
- Is there legislation to address the issue or to correct the problem identified in the letter?
- Is it within the jurisdiction of Congress to address the issue or correct the problem?

It may be a matter handled by the State Legislature.

It may be a decision to be made by the governor or other State agency.

It may be a private decision over which no level of government has control.

It may be a legal matter or one pending before the courts.

It may be an executive branch agency action which has not yet involved any congressional activity.

It may be pending before one of the Member's committees.

It may be in the hands of the other house of Congress.

There is **no particular format** for general issue or complaint letters because they are all so different. These letters generally present the greatest challenge to the imagination of the correspondent, particularly if the Member does not have a position on the issue. Here are a few ideas:

- In cases where legislation is pending to deal with the issue raised in the letter, the formats for responding to letters that mention specific legislation will work well. Since there is almost always legislation to address a particular issue, this approach is used frequently. [SAMPLE LETTERS] *Civil Rights, AIDS in Africa, Nursing shortage, Dividend Taxation (x-ref)*
- In cases where the Member has not taken a position on the issue, you might provide a description of the "pros" and "cons," indicating that the Member is still reviewing information on the subject and expressing appreciation for the constituent's input.

- In cases where the Member does have a position, stating that position or citing actions on related issues will do the job.
- In cases where the issue is not under the jurisdiction of Congress (i.e. the problem stems from a local ordinance or the particular bill mentioned is pending before the State Legislature), refer the constituent to the appropriate authority. If the general subject matter of the letter is related to issues pending before Congress, you might mention that as well.

“KITCHEN-SINK” LETTERS

(Letters covering a long list of topics)

Ask yourself:

- What is the policy of the office in terms of responding to such letters?
- Is there pre-existing language addressing some or all of the topics?

Possible approaches include:

- If it is the policy of your office to respond specifically to each issue raised in a letter, then do so. Getting to the bottom line quickly on each issue will help limit the length of the response.
- Often, the preference is to address two or three issues in some depth and then make a general acknowledgment that the Member has heard the views of the constituent on the remaining issues.
- Respond with a very general letter discussing the importance of hearing the views of the constituent on the numerous important issues facing Congress today and emphasizing the importance of communication.
- A slight variation of the general response approach is to acknowledge the input of the constituent and then share information about the current legislative priorities and activities of your boss.

LETTERS THAT EXPRESS SUPPORT FOR FUNDING FOR A SPECIFIC PROGRAM

Ask yourself:

- Where is Congress in the budget/appropriations process? What has been proposed? What, if any, action has Congress taken?
- Where is the program located? In which budget function or appropriations bill might it be found?
- Does the Member have a particular interest in this program?
- Is it a discretionary spending program or is it an entitlement?

There are **numerous patterns** for answering this type of letter, all of which depend upon the current stage of the budget/appropriations process. A very general outline of the type of information to be presented is:

1. Say something nice about the program, if warranted.
2. Describe the status: what funding level has been proposed, how that figure compares with funding in the prior year, how it is treated in the President's budget, how it is treated in the budget resolution, how it is treated in an appropriations or reconciliation bill.
3. Make a statement about the Member's position on funding for the specific program or federal funding in general. Mention any past actions or votes on the subject, if possible.
4. If applicable, let the writer know that the Member has written to the Appropriations Committee to express support for the program.

LETTERS THAT ADDRESS EXECUTIVE AGENCY REGULATIONS

Ask yourself:

- Does the constituent make it clear what he or she is talking about? If not, try to figure out which agency might have taken such an action and call the agency's liaison. If it is clear, determine if the regulations in question are still proposals or are final.
- What is the substance of the regulations? Get a copy of them

If they are proposed regulations, the proposal notice will indicate that there is a public comment period and will indicate when it will end. It will also provide an address to which comments are to be sent—along with the name and phone number of a contact person within the agency. Finally, it will describe the proposed changes. If they are final regulations, the notice will include the name and phone number of a contact person within the agency. The notice will also describe the comments received about the proposed regulations and will explain either how the final regulations were changed in response to comments or why no changes were made.

Your **response** will fall into one of three basic categories:

PROPOSED REGULATIONS (The public comment period is still open.)

1. Briefly describe the gist of the proposal and indicate that the agency is accepting public comments until (date).
2. Indicate that (if they have not already done so) you have shared the constituent's comments with the agency, and if they have further comments, they should be directed to: (Address listed in the *Federal Register*).
3. Indicate that all comments will be taken into consideration by the agency before final regulations are published.
4. You might also mention that the issue of interest to the constituent may be considered by Congress in an appropriate authorization or appropriations measure.

PROPOSED REGULATIONS (The public comment period has closed, but final regulations have not been published.)

1. Briefly describe the gist of the proposal and indicate that the comment period closed on (date).
2. Indicate the agency is in the process of reviewing the comments received prior to developing final regulations. (You may wish to call the agency contact to see how many comments they received and to get an indication as to how they ran. It is also good to check on the closing date, as the comment period for regulations is occasionally extended.)

3. Again, you might also mention that the issue of interest to the constituent may be considered by Congress in an appropriate authorization or appropriations measure.

FINAL REGULATIONS

It is rare for final regulations to change or for Congress to intervene. A few ideas:

1. If some type of congressional action with respect to the final regulations has been taken or is underway, you should mention it. In some cases, there may be legislation to repeal or alter the statute on which the regulations are based. [SAMPLE LETTER] *Ergonomics*
2. You can defend what the agency did, if that position is consistent with your Member's views. Many times, the regulations merely reflect what Congress instructed the agency to do. (If that is the case, you should check to see if there was a vote on this issue.)
3. You can agree that the action is awful, but indicate there is little congressional sentiment for reversing it. If applicable, you can mention any effort the Member is making to reverse the action or to find a middle ground.
4. You can attempt to stay neutral and indicate that you have called their concerns to the attention of the agency responsible; then buck it to the agency.

A FINAL NOTE: REGARDING "FREQUENT FLYERS"

"Frequent flyers" are those constituents who regularly communicate with their elected representatives. They generally write on a variety of topics, meaning that their letters are often distributed to several staff members. As a result, the Member can end up sending several letters to the same constituent within days of each other.

Depending upon the mail distribution system in your office, it may prove to be too cumbersome to address this issue. However, one approach might be to develop a list of these constituents, compile

SAMPLE LETTERS

These sample letters have been selected to illustrate the letter-writing approaches described in the previous section. These letters were contributed by several congressional offices, although information identifying the individual constituent and Member has been deleted.

SAMPLE: LETTER THAT MENTIONS SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

BASIC – AGREE style (Member and constituent are in agreement.)

(NOTE: With a change in the opening paragraph, this same letter could be used to respond to individuals who support the legislation.)

Dear :

Thank you for contacting me to express your opposition to HR 3295, the Help America Vote Act, recently introduced by Reps. Ney and Hoyer. *[Brief description of bill]*

Election reform is critical to ensuring that our country does not experience the chaos of an election like we did in 2000. All votes cast must be counted, and they must be counted in a manner that is exact, fair, and accountable. All voters must have access to polling places and not experience delays or hassles at the ballot box. *[General comment about subject matter]*

HR 3295 is a bipartisan response to some of the issues raised by the Bush-Gore contest of 2000. I believe this bill makes an honest attempt to address serious voting issues but I am not convinced that it resolves the problems it sets out to resolve. Consequently, I have not cosponsored this bill and won't until and unless I am assured that it does not adversely affect voters – especially those with disabilities – and that it actually improves the voting experience, not harms it. *[Positive comment, followed by Member's position and rationale for it]*

Your comments have been helpful to me and I appreciate your taking the time to send them. I will keep them in mind as I monitor this bill's progress through the legislative pipeline. *[Appreciation for constituent's letter]*

SAMPLE: LETTER THAT MENTIONS SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

BASIC – AGREE style (Member and constituent are in agreement)

Dear :

Thank you for contacting me to express your support for HR 4066, the Mental Health Equitable Treatment Act of 2002. I am a cosponsor of this important piece of legislation, which is currently pending in subcommittee for review. *[Brief description of bill and position of Member.]*

As you may know, HR 4066 directs health insurers to cover mental illnesses, substance abuse, and chemical dependency to the same extent that they cover medical and surgical ailments. This bill does not *require* health plans to cover mental health and substance abuse illnesses. It simply seeks to address a long standing inequity in the health insurance industry, which can stem from the stigma that is too often associated with mental illnesses. However, with effective medical attention, mental illnesses are usually just as treatable as other physical infirmities, if not more so. Instead of discriminating against individuals suffering from mental illness, we need to ensure that they receive the care they need to recover from their problems. *[General explanation of the subject matter and Member's reasons for support.]*

I will continue to work for accessible and affordable mental health care coverage and will of course support HR 4066 if it comes to the House floor for final consideration. I appreciate hearing your views on an issue that affects so many Americans. *[Assurance of the Member's continued work and support.]*

Sincerely,

SAMPLE: LETTER THAT MENTIONS SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

MODIFIED BASIC – AGREE style (The letter follows the “**BASIC – AGREE**” format, but is written generally to respond to both those who agree with the Member and those who do not.)

Dear :

Thank you for contacting me regarding legislation concerning student financial aid and persons convicted on drug charges. HR1053 did not pass the 106th Congress. Its author, Rep. Barney Frank, has reintroduced it as HR 786. Like HR 1053, HR 786 seeks to repeal provisions enumerated in the Higher Education Act that prevent persons convicted of drug offenses from receiving student financial aid. *[Status and brief description of legislation]*

I support HR 786 since all young Americans deserve the opportunity to obtain a quality education. Preventing drug offenders from receiving student financial aid merely blocks the path to higher learning. Further, denying student financial assistance is not an effective means to deter drug use. We cannot expect to prevent young people from using drugs by limiting opportunities for them to achieve their goals. *[Position of Member and reasons for support of the measure]*

Promoting higher education for our nation’s youth and deterring drug use are goals that we all want, but putting obstacles in the path of potential college students does not help us to achieve either goal. I will continue to work to promote higher education for all of our nation’s youth. *[Assurance of the Member’s continued work and support]*

Thank you again for expressing your opinion on this matter. Please feel free to keep me apprised of your views. *[Closing comments, thanking the constituent for writing]*

Sincerely,

SAMPLE LETTER: MENTIONS AN ISSUE, BUT NOT SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

Dear :

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with me. I appreciate hearing from you.

I recognize the importance of the nursing profession to our country's healthcare system and I am concerned with the growing shortage of nurses and other health professionals in this country. The impending retirement of the Baby Boom generation, combined with the aging of our healthcare workforce, re-emphasizes the need for well-trained, qualified nurses and to make sure that our nation is equipped to handle our health care needs. Right now, approximately one-third of the nursing workforce is over 50 years of age and by 2010, that number will climb to 40%. The shortage of other healthcare professionals, secretaries and support staff also adversely affect nurses and the care of patients. *[General explanation of the issue and the Member's view of it]*

I agree that Congress must take the necessary steps to alleviate these serious problems. As you may know, during the 107th Congress, the Nurse Reinvestment Act (PL 107-205) was signed into law. It expanded authority for existing nursing programs and created a number of new ones. For example, the new law authorizes scholarships and loan repayments for nursing students who agree to work in shortage areas after they graduate. In addition, the act authorizes public service announcements to promote nursing as a career, loan cancellations for nursing faculty, grants for geriatric nurse education, and grants to encourage nursing best-practices, such as those in the American Nurses Credentialing Center Magnet Recognition Program, for excellence in nursing services. Recently, Congress passed and the President signed into law an Omnibus Appropriations bill which included \$20,000,000 to fund Nurse Reinvestment Act programs in Fiscal Year 2003. While this was a good start, I believe we should invest more in this area in the future. *[Mention and brief description of legislation related to the subject and the Member's support for it]*

In addition, it is essential that we continue to invest in nursing-related research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Nursing research plays a unique role at NIH by sponsoring studies that focus on improving patient care and pain management, methods of treating disease, managing chronic conditions, and addressing the physical and emotional needs of patients. As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I have been working to provide a significant increase for the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR) within the NIH. In the final FY 03 Omnibus Appropriations Bill, the NINR received \$131,438,000, an increase of nearly \$11 million from FY 02 totals.

[Description of additional steps being pursued by the Member's to address the issue]

I was also extremely pleased that the FY 03 Omnibus bill included nearly \$1.5 million in funding for several nurse training and education programs throughout [name of State]. These programs involve workforce development boards, technical colleges, universities and clinics throughout the State and are designed to increase recruitment, training and retention of individuals at all levels of the nursing profession, as well as expand access to care. You can be sure I will keep your views in mind as Congress continues to work on this important issue, and I will continue to support programs that help [name of State] address its current and future health care needs. *[Description of the specific benefit to the Member's home State of congressional action. Assurances of the Member's continued work and support]*

Again, thank you for contacting me. I appreciate knowing your thoughts on this issue. *[Closing comments, thanking the constituent for writing]*

Sincerely,

SAMPLE: LETTER MENTIONS AN ISSUE, BUT NOT SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

Dear :

Thank you for contacting me to let me know you are worried that Americans' civil rights are being eroded due to "war hysteria." I appreciate hearing from you and your thoughtful comments. *[Brief statement of the issue]*

I will be the first to stand up and say this country needs to be defended from foreign – and domestic – terrorism. But as with all things, reason and rationale go a long way in creating protocols that not only prevent and protect against terrorism, but also maintain the very liberties that are the heart of our democracy. I think the current Administration is giving short shrift to honoring civil liberties in this country while it fights the war on terrorism overseas. *[Position of the Member]*

This nation cannot be distracted from reinforcing its domestic civil liberties because of foreign – in this case the Afghan war – activities or pressures. We would cease to be the country we are if we allowed this to happen. *[Position of the Member]*

I will not support legislative initiatives that would undermine our civil rights. In fact, that is why I voted against the PATRIOT Act, a bill to give the government unprecedented powers to spy, arrest and otherwise invade the privacy of ordinary Americans with little provocation or justification. *[Reference to legislation related to the topic]*

I thank you for sharing your thoughts with me on this. I assure you I will be vigilant in protecting the civil liberties that make our nation so strong and unique among all nations. *[Assurance of continued adherence to position on the issue]*

Sincerely,

SAMPLE: LETTER MENTIONS AN ISSUE, BUT NOT SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

Dear :

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with me regarding the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa. I appreciate hearing from you.

[Brief statement of the issue]

As you know, many African nations, particularly those in the Sub-Saharan region, have been devastated by the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus. More than 29.4 million adults and children are infected with the HIV virus in the region, which has about 10 percent of the world's population but more than 70 percent of the worldwide total of infected people. In some countries, such as Botswana and South Africa, over 20 percent of the population is believed to be infected with HIV/AIDS. AIDS has surpassed malaria as the leading cause of death in sub-Saharan Africa, and it has wrought untold damage to the families, communities and economy of the region. *[General explanation of the subject]*

As you may know, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan has instituted a Global AIDS and Health Fund, which is used primarily as a war chest for fighting AIDS in Africa. To date pledges to the Global Fund from government and private contributions amount to more than \$2 billion. During his State of the Union address, President Bush pledged \$15 billion over the next five years for the global fight against aids. Unfortunately, the administration has only requested \$450 million in AIDS funding for FY04 with an additional \$1.55 billion that would be provided by international affairs accounts, such as Health and Human Services and the Center for Disease Control.

[Explanation of efforts underway to address the issue]

Congress has taken action to increase funding to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS worldwide and in Africa. I co-sponsored an amendment in the 2003 Omnibus appropriation spending bill (H J Res 2) that would increase our commitment to the United Nations Global Fund to fight AIDS by \$180 million. I am pleased to inform you that the Omnibus appropriation spending bill, which was signed into law on February 20, 2003, contains \$250 million for the Global Fund to fight AIDS, \$70 million more than originally requested, and an additional \$89 million

which is funded through the Center for Disease Control. This amount will bring the total U.S. contribution for FY03 in the fight against global AIDS to \$2.48 billion. You can be certain that I will continue to support funding to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa and worldwide. *[Mention of legislation related to the subject and the Member's position/actions on it. Assurance of the Member's continued work and support]*

Again, thank you for contacting me. I appreciate knowing your thoughts on this issue. *[Closing comments, thanking the constituent for writing]*

Sincerely,

SAMPLE: LETTER MENTIONS AN ISSUE, BUT NOT SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

BASIC – DISAGREE style (Member and constituent are not in agreement.)

Dear :

Thank you for writing me on proposals to exclude stock dividends from taxation at the individual level. I appreciate your views on this important and controversial matter, and I apologize for the delay in my response. *[Brief statement of the issue and apology for a delayed response]*

As I am sure you know, President Bush recently proposed allowing individuals to exclude from taxable income some of the dividends they receive from their stocks. The President estimates his proposal will cost \$364 billion over ten years, by far the largest component of his \$674 billion tax cut proposal. And while I appreciate the theoretical arguments against maintaining the double taxation of dividends, I cannot support the President's proposal. *[Brief description of the proposal and statement of the Member's position]*

It is true, as proponents of the dividend exclusion claim, that dividend income is taxed twice – once at the corporate level when a company earns it, and again when they distribute the earnings in the form of dividends to their shareholders. And this double taxation perhaps led to distorted decisions about investing in or issuing dividend yielding stock by investors and companies. However, fixing this single market inefficiency, at the cost of hundreds of billions dollars, is not responsible or sensible tax policy. *[Presentation of the pros and cons]*

At a time when our deficit is projected to top \$300 billion in FY 2003 – at a time when we need every spare federal dollar to address international instability abroad and the threat of terrorism at home – at a time when the Administration is pushing cuts in education, homeland security programs, low income heating assistance, and farmers – can we really afford to spend billions to reduce the tax burden on the small percentage of Americans who receive dividend income? *[Start of explanation of the Member's reasons for opposing the proposal]*
Perhaps the answer would be “yes” if such a tax cut would help stimu-

late our sluggish economy and get the rising number of unemployed back to work. But even the dividend exclusion's most ardent supporters do not claim it would provide much immediate stimulus to the economy. In the first place, the cut would overwhelmingly benefit our highest income tax payers - and these are the individuals least likely to spend a cash windfall. Secondly, while such a tax cut might make investment in stocks that pay dividends more attractive, those new investment dollars might shift out of other tax advantaged instruments, like municipal bonds. States are already struggling. It is the wrong time to pass a proposal that will disadvantage their bonds and lower their state tax revenues.

And finally, the dividend tax exclusion will be a nightmare to administer, making our already complex tax code even more of a mess. Because corporations have many ways to shield profits from taxes, the Bush Administration is working on a proposal to allow individuals to exclude dividend income from taxes only to the extent that the corporation has paid taxes on their profits. The President has not said exactly how this will work, but they will have to devise a system whereby each company separately reports to each taxpayer the extent to which their dividends are excludable from taxable income.

Now is not the time to pass a huge tax cut that will not help the economy, that will definitely hurt the government's bottom line, that will drain resources from urgent needs for education reform, for new homeland security measures, even for fighting a war, and that will make a complicated tax code even more complicated. Now is the time for serious, bipartisan discussion on what can be done to get our economy back on track and meet our pressing domestic needs - all without worsening our budget deficit. The stock dividend exclusion has no place in such a debate. *[The three paragraphs above provide additional explanation of the Member's reasons for opposing the proposal]*

Again, thank you for contacting me. I'm sorry that we disagree on this issue, but I'm certain there are many other issues on which we do agree. *[Closing comments acknowledging that the Member and the writer are in disagreement and thanking the constituent for writing]*

Sincerely,

SAMPLE: LETTER IN SUPPORT OF FUNDING FOR A SPECIFIC PROGRAM

Dear :

Thank you for taking the time to contact me regarding education funding for FY2003. It was good to hear from you. *[Brief statement of the issue]*

I agree we need to maintain our commitment to education and reflect this commitment in our appropriations for education programs. In the struggle to meet the challenges of educating today's students, schools and communities need more help. The Federal government clearly must be willing to make difficult decisions to rein in government spending but I refuse to cut corners on education. I believe that investment and innovative reform within our schools is the answer to the current education challenges we face. We need educated and determined young people to lead us into the 21st century. In order to ensure the future of this nation, we have to make sure our children and young adults are better prepared. *[Positive comments about the issue and the Member's reasons for support]*

As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I have worked each year for increases in funding for education programs. That is why I supported an amendment, introduced by Senator Kennedy, to the FY 2003 omnibus budget bill. The Kennedy Amendment would have increased education funding by \$6 billion over the FY03 omnibus bill and \$7.7 billion over FY 2002 – rather than the \$90 million cut recommended by the President. Unfortunately, this amendment was not agreed to. I was very concerned that the omnibus budget bill passed by the Senate fell far short of the funding we promised just a year ago when Congress passed the “No Child Left Behind Act.” Just as we are asking States, teachers and students to achieve more, we are taking away the funding they need to succeed. *[Description of specific actions taken by the Member in support of the funding]*

As you may know, the President's FY 2003 budget request included \$50.3 billion for programs under the Department of Education. However, I was concerned that the President's request eliminated and provided inadequate funding for several important education programs. I supported the FY2003 budget, recently passed by Congress,

that includes appropriations for the Department of Education. The budget provides \$53.1 billion in education spending, \$2.8 billion more than the President's request. *[Description of the status of the funding]*

Given the tight budgetary challenges faced by Congress this year, I am pleased Congress made a sound investment in one of its most important domestic programs. However, in future budgets, I believe we must continue to strive for increases in education funding. You can be sure I will continue to fight to make education one of our nation's highest priorities. *[Assurance of the Member's continued work and support]*

Again, thank you for contacting me. I appreciate knowing your thoughts on this issue. *[Closing comments, thanking the constituent for writing]*

Sincerely,

SAMPLE: LETTER DEALING WITH FINAL REGULATIONS

Dear :

Thank you for contacting me on the issue of ergonomics. As you know, after 10 years of study, review and research, the Department of Labor moved to promulgate the new ergonomics regulations just prior to the close of the Clinton Administration. On March 7, 2001, the House of Representatives voted 223-206 to rescind the regulations; the Senate had voted to do the same the day before. The ergonomics regulation therefore will not be implemented. The proposed rule put forward by Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) generated a tremendous amount of controversy and raised questions about its cost to business, contributing to its retraction by Congress. *[Reference to congressional action to rescind the regulations]*

The ergonomics rulemaking was a 10-year effort, begun in 1992 by the Bush Administration. More than 1000 witnesses testified on this issue, and over 7000 written comments were submitted expressing various views on the matter. Currently, approximately 1.8 million U.S. workers experience a work-related musculoskeletal disorder, such as injuries from overexertion or repetitive motion. About one-third of these injuries, nearly 600,000 incidents, are serious enough to require time off from work, and cost businesses \$15 - \$20 billion in workers' compensation claims. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 34 percent of all lost workday injuries are related to ergonomic injuries. The Department of Labor estimates that the ergonomics rule would prevent about 300,000 injuries per year, and save \$9 billion in workers' compensation and related costs. About one-third of general industry work sites would be covered by the rule, protecting 27 million workers. Fewer than 3 percent of general industry employees currently have effective ergonomics programs. *[Provision of information about the issues involved]*

I am hopeful that, in light of the failure of these regulations to take effect, some other means will be developed to reduce repetitive stress injuries and protect America's workers, while not costing American business "an arm and a leg." *[Express of desire to find a middle ground]*

I hope this information is helpful to you. Thanks again for your interest in this important matter. *[Closing remarks and thanks]*

Sincerely,