

They Work For Us

A Self-Advocate's Guide to Getting Through to your Elected Officials



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Why is this guide important?

The government makes laws based on what they think will be best for the people. The public elects, or votes for, most of the people who work in the government. The public means everyday people like you and me. The people we elect to represent us are our **elected officials**.

Elected officials need to think about what the public wants when they make a law. Otherwise, they won't get elected again. This guide will show you how to get in touch with your elected officials. It will also explain how to vote for who you want to represent you in the government.

Elected officials listen to the problems that the public have. Then, they use laws to help fix these problems. This is why it is so important that you talk with your elected officials when there is a problem you want them to help fix.

There are many laws that go through the government that affect the lives of disabled people. That's why we have to make sure that people in the government hear what people with disabilities think about these policies. Our voices make a big difference.

It's also important to vote for people in government that will work to protect the rights of disabled people. That way when problems come up, we have people on our side in the government. Nothing about us, without us!

Using this guide

Glossary

You'll see some words in this guide that are **bolded**. These words can be found in the Glossary at the end of the guide.

Meet Sally Jones

Throughout this guide, we'll be giving examples of how to communicate with your elected officials in different ways. To bring these examples to life, we've made up a fictional situation. In this example situation, Sally Jones, a resident of Normaltown, California, wants her elected official to address a big problem: in her town and in towns all over the United States, swarms of angry bees are showing up everywhere.

The problem and the people involved are made-up, but the strategies Sally uses are real and practical.

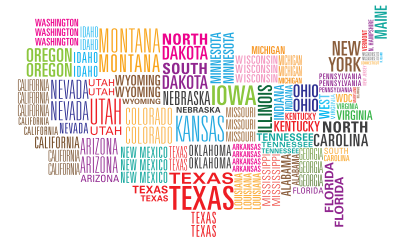
Who has the power to make laws?

There are two main types of laws that affect us:

1. **Federal** laws
2. **State** laws

Federal laws are laws that apply to the whole United States. State laws are laws that only apply to people living or working in a certain state.

For example, in Arkansas, it's illegal to pay somebody less than \$8.50 an hour at their job. But in Washington, it's illegal to pay somebody less than \$11 an hour at their job.



Federal government

The federal government makes federal laws. The people who have the power to make federal laws are the **members of Congress**. There are two different parts of **Congress**. These two parts are:

1. The **Senate**
2. The **House of Representatives**.

U.S. Senate

The elected officials in the Senate are **Senators**. There are 100 Senators in the U.S. Senate. Two Senators represent each state.

U.S. House of Representatives

Representatives are the elected officials in the U.S. House of Representatives. There are 435 U.S. Representatives. Every state has a different number of U.S. Representatives, based on how many people live in the state. For example, there are about 39 million people who live in California. California has 53 U.S. Representatives. There are only about 1 million people who live in Montana. Montana only has 1 U.S. Representative. Every state gets at least 1 Representative.

Each U.S. Representative comes from a different district. Districts are made up of one town or a few towns that are next to each other. California has 53 districts, each covering a different part of the state.

State governments



State governments are almost exactly the same as the federal government. State governments are just on a smaller scale. Each state has a State Legislature with two parts, like the U.S. Congress does. States have State Senators and State Representatives to make state laws. The only exception is Nebraska, which has a State Legislature with only one part.

States can't make laws that would conflict with federal laws. For example, federal law set the minimum wage to \$7.25 per hour at a job. States can make laws that increase the minimum wage in their state. But, they can't make laws to lower minimum wage is less than \$7.25 an hour.

Local governments



Local governments can be very different depending on how many people live in a place or how big the place is. Sometimes local representatives will be elected to make local laws. Other times, laws will be made by a City Council, which is led by a City Manager or a Mayor. Local governments can't make laws that would conflict with state or federal laws.

Where can I find contact information for my elected officials?



U.S. Senators

You can find [contact information for your Senators here](#). Click on your state. This will bring up the names of the 2 Senators from your state.



U.S. Representative

You can find [contact information for your Representative from the House of Representatives here](#). Type in your zip code on this page. This will bring up the name of the Representative from your district.

State and local government

The Humane Society has made a handy tool to find out who represents you in local and state government. All you need to do is enter your address or zip code. Then, the tool will tell you the names and contact information of your elected officials. [Click here to visit the Humane Society's tool](#).

You can use these websites to find:

- phone numbers to call
- where to send letters
- where to send emails.

You can also call or send an email to make an appointment to meet in-person with your elected official.

Office locations

Members of Congress have more than one office. Each member of Congress has one national office in Washington, D.C. They also have one or more district offices in the state they are from. Keep this in mind when contacting your members of Congress by phone or in-person.

State representatives may have more than one office in their state. Local representatives, like a City Councilmember, usually have just one office.

Social media

Your elected officials may also have their own pages on social media websites. Use the searchbar of these websites to enter their name and find out.

What ways can I contact my elected officials?

There are many different ways that you can get in touch with your elected officials. Some of these ways make a bigger difference than others. There are two things that increase the impact of contacting your elected officials:

1. How personal it is
2. How many people can do it

Here is a list, in order of how big an impact something can make:

1. **Phone calls** - Can make a big difference if a lot of people call. Phone calls are both personal and lots of people can make phone calls.
2. **Visiting your elected officials in-person** - Can make a big difference, but is harder for a lot of people to do at once.
3. **Writing letters** - Not as good as phone calls, but still important. It takes more effort to send a letter than to send an email, so letters are often taken a lot more seriously than emails.
4. **Emails** - A lot of emails might signal that an issue is important. But, since a lot of people use the same templates for emails, it's harder for your personal message to come through. Elected officials get a lot of emails, so the people whose job it is to read these emails might not read the whole thing.
5. **Social Media (Facebook and Twitter)** - Can be good for organizing people to do things like phone calls and emails, and for learning more about your elected officials, but it isn't the best choice for contacting them.

The next few sections will talk in detail about how to use each of these methods.



Making a phone call

The best way to contact your elected officials is by phone. Phone calls work better than written forms of communication like letters or email. This is because the person on the other line has to listen to what you have to say. They can't just skim the words like they could with something written.

Phone calls also take more time for an elected official's staff to respond to. This means that if you can get a lot of people to call about a certain bill or law at the same time, it will make it hard for people in that government office to do anything else but answer calls. This shows elected officials that the public really cares about a problem. That could affect how they choose to vote for the law.

Elected officials keep track of how many people call about each problem. So if one problem is getting a lot of calls, it may make them think more about that problem.

Remember that members of Congress have both national and district offices. And, members of the State Legislature may have more than one office. The best thing to do is call all their offices. But if you can only call one, that is also okay. If you have to choose one office to call, you should call the district office closest to where you live. The person you talk to will not be your elected official; instead, it will be someone who works for them. This person's job is to let the elected official know what you said.

Before you call, it is a good idea to prepare a script so you know what you want to say. You should talk about your personal experiences. That will show why the problem you are calling about is important to you. Be careful to keep your call short. That way, the person you are talking to understands the main point of what you are saying.

The person you are talking to may ask if you are a **constituent**. This means that you live in the area that your elected official represents. Elected officials care the most about the calls coming from the people that can vote for them. So, you shouldn't call any elected officials who don't represent your area. To make it easier for the person you are talking to, say where you live at the beginning of the call.

The person you are talking to may also ask if you would like your elected official to respond to your call. This means that your elected official will send you a letter about how they feel about the issue you are calling about. It is your choice how you want to answer this question.

If there is a specific law that you would like to talk with your elected official about, it is also important to include the name of that law (or bill number) in your message.

Sample script

Here is a sample of a good script for calling your elected official about a law:

You: Hello, I would like to make a comment to [elected official's name] about [problem or policy].

Staff member: Certainly. Please go ahead.

You: Thank you. My name is [your full name], and I live at [address]. I'm calling to urge [elected official's name] to support laws that [fix the problem you are calling about - explain that here]. I care about this because [reason].

Staff member: I will give your message to [elected official's name]. Would you like for him/her to send a response to you?

You: [Yes OR No]. Thank you for your time, good-bye.

Staff Member: Thank you for your comments. Have a good day.

Example: Calling an elected official

Sally Jones is from Normaltown, California. In her town and in towns all over the United States, swarms of angry bees are showing up everywhere. They are attacking people and making people feel afraid to go outside. It is also costing people and the government a lot of money to pay for health care for people hurt by the bees.

Sally is part of the Stop the Bees Community Group. The group works to make elected officials aware of the bee problem. Recently, a bill called the Beekeeping Act was introduced in Congress. If this bill passed and became a law, the government would give money to help build a colony for the bees away from the cities and towns. Sally wants to talk with her U.S. Representative, Anne Smith, to ask her to support the Beekeeping Act.

Here is what Sally might say if she called Representative Smith's office on the phone:

Sally: Hello, I would like to make a comment to Representative Smith about the Beekeeping Act.

Smith's staff member: Certainly. Please go ahead.

Sally: Thank you. My name is Sally Jones, and I live at 99 Community Lane in Normaltown, CA. I'm calling to urge Representative Smith to support the Beekeeping Act. I care about this because many members of my community have been attacked by bees, and it is making us all afraid to go outside. The Beekeeping Act would give the bees somewhere else to go so they would leave our town, and then we could all be safe again.

Staff member: I will give your message to Representative Smith. Would you like for her to send a response to you?

Sally: Yes. Thank you for your time, good-bye.

Staff Member: Thank you for your comments. Have a good day.

What if I can't talk on the phone?

You can use an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device, like an iPad, to type out what you want to say. Then, use text-to-speech to have your text read out loud while you are on the phone with an elected official's office. You don't have to wait for the staff member to respond to you if you want to have your whole comment read aloud at once. If the staff member has questions for you after you make your speech, you can let them know you need some time to answer.

Sample script

Here is a sample AAC script:

Hello, I'm a real constituent who is using a text-to-speech device because of a disability. I would like to make a comment to [elected official's name] about [problem or policy]. My name is [your full name], and I live at [full address]. I'm calling to urge [elected official's name] to support laws that [fix the problem you are calling about - explain that here]. I care about this because [reason]. I [would like OR would not like] a response from [elected official's name]. If you need more information, please let me know and give me a little time to type the answer. Thank you.

Another option for AAC users is to use the script for non-AAC phone calls to type out an answer for each part of the call, then hit each part in the right order to talk with the person on the phone.

You can also write out your script and have someone else read it for you over the phone. All they have to do is tell your elected official at the beginning of the call that they are speaking for you by saying "Hi, my name is [their name] and I am calling on behalf of [your name], who can't speak." Some people are making groups in their communities to volunteer to make calls for people who can't speak. Try checking social media to see if there is a group like this near you, or you can make one of your own.

If you are able to speak but get anxious when talking to people, you can also call your elected official after their office is closed (usually after 5 p.m., or on the weekends). This way, you will get an answering machine to leave a message instead of talking to a person. Elected officials and their staff members do listen to phone messages, so it is still helpful to do.

Meeting in-person

Face-to-face meetings are very important. This is because elected officials can't ignore people that are right in front of them talking about a problem. It also helps them put a "face" to a certain bill or law. If they can think of you and your story when they are deciding whether or not to support a law, it could affect their decision about the law.

Remember that members of Congress have offices in Washington, D.C., and in their home states. You can choose which location works best for you. You can find out how to make an appointment on the website of the elected official. Some elected officials have a page on their website to make appointments. But, for most elected officials, you will need to call or email them. Plan to make your appointment at least 2 weeks before you want to meet.

What should I expect at a meeting?

Here are some tips for what to expect at an in-person meeting, and how you can prepare:

- Meetings are usually about 15 to 45 minutes long. Try and find out how long a meeting will be beforehand so you can plan ahead for what you want to say.
- You probably won't meet with your elected official directly. Instead, you will meet with a staff member who will report back to your elected official.
- Learn everything you can about the law or problem you are talking about before the meeting. Also learn about what other people might say to argue against your opinion.
- If you have any handouts, charts or pictures that will help you explain your opinion, bring a few copies with you. You can give them to the people you're talking to and have one for yourself to look at.
- Arrive at the meeting place about 10 minutes before the appointment time. Try to dress nicely.

Elevator speeches

It may be a good idea to prepare an **elevator speech** before you meet with your elected official. An elevator speech is a short speech that you have memorized in case you get a moment with an elected official. For example, riding the elevator with them. Elevator speeches help you remember your most important points. They're also good to fall back on if your meeting is very short.

Here is what you should include in an elevator speech:

- Your first and last name
- Where you live
- Your school, workplace, or some other part of the community you belong to
- Bring up the law or problem you are advocating for. Talk about how the issue affects you or the people around you.
- Tell them WHY you and others need the policy you support.
- Thank the legislator for listening to you

Try to keep your speech under 1 minute long, and be sure to practice beforehand. Think about bringing a written document with the information on it. Then you can give the document to your elected official so they can read it and learn more later.

Example: Sally's elevator speech

Here is an example of an elevator speech Sally might give to her Representative:

Hi, I'm Sally Jones, and I'm from Normaltown, California. I'm a member of the Stop the Bees Community Group. I'm here today because I would like you to support the Beekeeping Act that will give money to build a new bee colony away from our city centers. Right now, there are so many bees all over towns across the United States. I know I was afraid just to leave my house to come here and meet you. Everyone I've talked to fears for their safety against the bees. Building this bee colony will give us back the safety that all Americans need, so we won't need to feel afraid to leave our houses anymore. Please support the Beekeeping Act to give us our safety back. Thank you for your time.

What should I do during a meeting?

- Introduce yourself to your elected official or their staff member: tell them who you are and where you live.
- Try to start by complimenting something your elected official has done recently that you support. This helps make the person you're talking to more open to your ideas.
- Be ready to answer questions and discuss your points in detail.

Other things to keep in mind:

The person you are talking to may disagree with what you have to say. This can be frustrating. Since your goal is to get them to change their mind, make sure that you don't raise your voice or make it seem like you are arguing with them. If you do this, they might not listen to what you are saying. Try and focus more on why you support what you do rather than telling them why they shouldn't support what they do. Always try to end the conversation on a positive note.

After a meeting, always send a thank-you email. This lets your elected official know that you appreciate their time, and helps them remember what you talked about.

Example: Visiting an elected official

Let's say that Sally goes to visit Representative Smith, to talk about the bee problem. Here is an example of a good meeting between Sally and Representative Smith:

Sally: Hello, Representative Smith. My name is Sally Jones, and I'm from Normaltown.

Representative Smith: Great to meet you, Sally.

Sally: It's great to meet you as well. I wanted to start off by telling you how much I appreciated your support for the Free Cereal for Everyone Act. I know it's helped my family to much to have a steady source of breakfast food.

Representative Smith: Of course. It is the most important meal of the day, after all.

Sally: I wanted to talk with you about the Beekeeping Act. Are you aware of this bill?

Representative Smith: I have heard about it, but please remind me.

Sally: The Beekeeping Act would put money towards building a bee colony for the bees. I'm sure you're aware that there are bees all over town, and it is making many members of our community feel unsafe. I have a list of names for you of over 500 community members who say the bees have left them feeling scared to go outside. Just last week, my nephew was attacked by the bees. For the safety of us and our children, it's so important that the bees are built another place to live. They can't keep flying all over town like this.

Representative Smith: I understand your concerns, Sally. But the bees also give us important things, like honey. I'm not sure I can support a law that would make all the bees leave.

Sally: I agree, making sure we have honey is an important thing. But right now, the government is spending so much money on health care for people who are being hurt by the bees. Building the bees a new place to live will save all that money. Then we can use that money to buy honey.

Representative Smith: What if we build this bee colony and then the bees don't want to use it?

Sally: I have talked with many expert beekeepers, who told me that if the colony was built, the bees will definitely use it. The reason so many people are getting attacked by the bees right now is actually because the bees are angry about not having their own place to live. Here is a written document of what the beekeepers had to say.

Representative Smith: Hmm. That is a good point. I will think more about this issue.

Sally: Thank you for your time today. Please consider supporting the Beekeeping Act.

Emails

You can also contact your elected officials by email. Keep in mind that the people who read the emails for elected officials usually don't read the whole thing. Instead, they will skim to find out what law the email is about.

You should put a clear request in the email subject line. For example, Sally might send an email with the subject line **Please Support the Beekeeping Act, H.R. 2899**. Even though the body of your email might not be read, it is still good to send emails. When a lot of people send messages about a law, it shows that elected official that it is something they should keep in mind when voting on it.

Letters and faxes

Benefits of writing letters

Writing a letter is a little more helpful than writing an email. Your elected officials are more likely to notice a bunch of paper letters than a bunch of emails. Elected officials keep track of how many letters or emails they get about a problem. So, if one problem is getting a lot of emails or letters, it may make them think more about that problem.

A good thing about letters is that they are postmarked. This means that a mark is put on the letter to show where it came from. That proves that you are a real constituent living in your elected official's state or district.



Faxing

There is another method that combines parts of emails and paper letters called **faxing**. Elected officials have fax machines in their offices. Fax machines have numbers like phones do. They also have printers attached.

There is a website called FaxZero that you can use to send faxes to your elected officials. Here's how it works:

1. You type out what you want to say.
2. FaxZero sends the message to the fax machine of your elected official.
3. Your elected official's fax machine will print out your message as a paper copy.

You can fax any number you want, but there is a special part of FaxZero's website to fax your members of Congress. You can find your Senators at https://faxzero.com/fax_senate.php, and find your Representatives from the House of Representatives at https://faxzero.com/fax_congress.php.



Template for letters and faxes

Here is a template for sending a letter or a fax to an elected official:

[Date]

[Elected official's full name]

[Address]

Dear [elected official's name]:

I am writing to urge [elected official's name] to support [law or policy]. Laws that [fix a certain problem - explain here] are very important to me because [reason].

[Use this space to talk more about how the law or policy you are writing about will help people].

I would like to learn more about what you are doing to address [problem], so I look forward to hearing back from you about your thoughts on this.

Thank you for taking the time to read and respond to my letter. I think [problem] is an important issue, and would like to make sure that it is fixed by [how you think it should be fixed - explain here].

Sincerely,

[Your full name]

[Address]

[Phone Number]

[Email Address]

Example: Writing a letter to a member of Congress

Here is what a letter from Sally to Representative Smith might look like:

February 27, 2017

Representative Anne Smith

1000 Town Center

Normaltown, CA

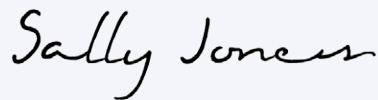
Dear Representative Smith,

Laws that will control where bees can live are very important to me because right now, there are so many bees in my town that it is difficult and scary to go outside. The Beekeeping Act will help fix this problem by giving money towards building a bee colony away from our town. A lot of my friends and neighbors have been hurt by the bees, so doing this will help them feel safe again, and also help save money on health care.

I would like to learn more about what you are doing to address the bee swarm problem, so I look forward to hearing back from you about your thoughts on this.

Thank you for taking the time to read and respond to my letter. I think controlling the bees is an important issue, and would like to make sure that it is fixed by making sure all the bees have a place to live that isn't in our towns and cities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sally Jones". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of "Sally" and "Jones" being capitalized and prominent.

Sally Jones

88 Community Lane

Normaltown, CA

888-555-0123

sallyjones@stopthebees.com

Social Media

“Social media” is any website or online resource that you can use to talk to or share ideas with other people. There are 2 major social media websites that you can use to help contact your elected officials. They are called Facebook and Twitter. Social media can be used to connect with other people who care about the same problems that you do. You can also use it to spread the word about problems you care about so that other people can learn about them. Or, to learn about problems you didn’t know about before.

Facebook

Personal profiles and friends

Facebook is the most-used social media site by American adults. On Facebook, you can make a private page for yourself, called a profile, and post whatever you want on it.

If you have friends who use Facebook, you can “add” them as a friend. Then, you can see each other’s posts and make your own posts on each other’s profiles. This helps people stay in touch with people they know and share things that they care about.

You can also use Facebook to talk with people you don’t know in real life. You can do this by creating a Facebook page or group.

Pages

A Facebook page is a public profile for a person or group. For example, a celebrity may have a page to let their fans know what they are up to. A nonprofit organization may have a page to let people know about advocacy opportunities. Anyone can “like” a page to follow it. Pages are good for sharing blog posts, articles, events, and news. Elected officials often have their own Facebook pages. You can like their page to keep up with what they are doing. You can leave comments on their page to ask them questions also, but they usually won’t answer them.

Groups

Facebook groups are places where people who have a common interest or are working towards the same goals can talk to each other.

There are three different privacy settings for groups:

1. Secret
2. Closed
3. Public

“Secret” means no one can find the group unless they are invited to join. “Closed” means people can find the group and see its members, but not see posts in it. “Public” means that anyone can:

- find the group
- see the group’s members, and
- see the posts in the group.

Why use Facebook?

Facebook is a good tool for many reasons. You can tell people about topics that are important to you on your Facebook profile, or in a Facebook group. Facebook groups and pages let what you say reach a lot of people in a short time. You can create a page if you are a part of an advocacy group. You can use the group to let people know what you are doing and give them chances to become more civically engaged.

You can also follow pages or join groups for other organizations to learn what they are doing. Lots of people and pages on Facebook post news about policies and laws. Just by checking Facebook, you can learn more about problems that matter to the people you know.

Facebook is also a great tool to work together with other advocacy organizations. That's because it can be easier to send a message on Facebook than to make a phone call or meet up in-person. You can organize projects like letter-writing or phone call campaigns to your members of government. As we talked about before, elected officials also sometimes have their own Facebook pages. You can post on these pages how you feel about important issues and see what other people in your area think.

Using Facebook to Stop the Bees

Let's say Sally wanted to spread the word about the Stop the Bees Community Group. She wants to organize a letter-writing campaign to Representative Smith. Sally could make a Facebook Group for the Stop the Bees Community Group. Then, she could invite her friends and family to join the group.

Sally could also post the group on Representative Smith's Facebook page. That way, other people living in Normaltown who are about stopping the bees could join the group. Sally could post information about what people should put in their letters to Representative Smith in the Facebook group. This helps make sure that Representative Smith gets lots of letters that are clear about what the bee problem is and how it can be fixed.

Twitter

Twitter does not have pages or groups like Facebook. Each person on Twitter just gets their own profile.

Tweets

On Twitter, posts are called "Tweets", and posting is called "Tweeting". Everything that someone tweets has to be 140 characters or fewer, which is about 25 words. This can be hard for some people to do. But, it also helps make sure everything people post is short and to-the-point.

Following and re-tweeting

You can "follow" people on Twitter to see what they are saying. If you want the people that follow you to see a certain tweet from someone else, you can "re-tweet" it. Re-tweeting something makes the Tweet show up on your own Twitter page.

Re-tweeting is easy to do. This makes it easy for important Tweets to spread around Twitter really quickly. Many elected officials have a Twitter account. Following them can help you stay informed about what they are doing and spread the word to other people who may care.

#Hashtags and @tagging

People on Twitter can put something in their tweets called a "hashtag". Hashtags are a way to let people group tweets into categories. To use a hashtag, type the hashtag symbol (# - shift key and 3 on most US keyboards). Then type a word or phrase with no spaces.

When a lot of people use the same hashtag at once, that hashtag begins "trending." That means the hashtag will show up on the front page of Twitter.

You can also "tag" a person in a Twitter post, which means that they will see the Tweet. To tag someone, type a period (.), then the @ symbol (shift key and 2 on most US keyboards), and enter the Twitter username of the person you want to tag.

Twitterbombs

Hashtags are a big reason why Twitter can be a good tool to get the attention of people in the government. When people work together to come up with a hashtag and get it trending, it is called a "Twitterbomb".

Twitterbombs make it so lots of people see tweets with that hashtag. You can use this to help people learn about a problem that they may not have known about before, and give people ideas for how to take action to solve a problem. If a member of government has a Twitter, you can organize a Twitterbomb and tag them in all of the tweets. That way, whoever is in charge of their account will definitely notice what you are saying.

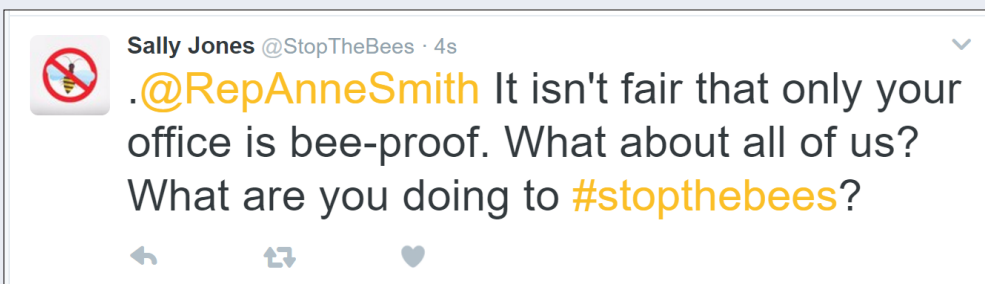
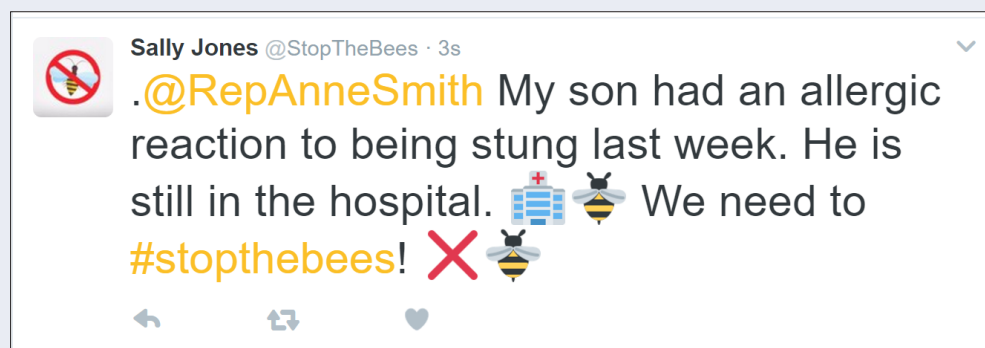
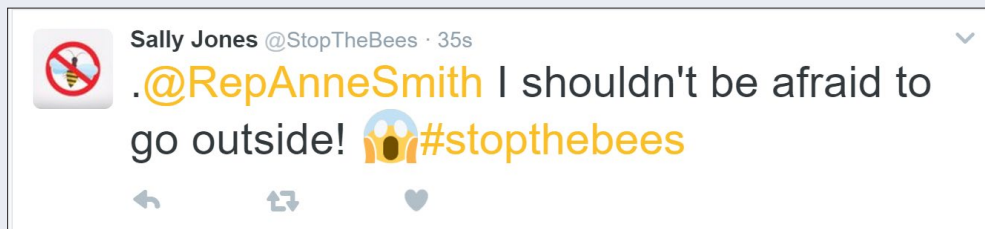
Live-tweeting

Another helpful thing that people on Twitter do is “live-tweeting”. Live-tweeting is when someone goes to an event, and posts on Twitter what is going on at the event for people who can’t be there. This can be helpful for things like meetings with a member of government, since not everyone is going to be able to go talk to their members of government. Live-tweeting helps people stay informed about what is going on in real-time. That way, people can take action for anything that needs to be done quickly after the event is over. For example, organizing a phone call campaign to a member of government who is against an important policy.

Example: Using Twitter to #StopTheBees

Let’s say Sally decided to use Twitter to show Representative Smith what a big problem the bees have become. She organized a Twitterbomb using the hashtag #stopthebees. People shared their personal stories about how the bees have hurt them, using the hashtag. They tagged the Twitter account of Representative Smith in all of the Tweets so that she would see them, and everyone who followed Representative Smith would also see them. Some people who saw the Tweets even made their own Tweets about the bees afterwards.

Here are some examples of Tweets that might go in the #stopthebees hashtag:



All about voting

Why should I vote?

Voting decides who gets to hold most of the important jobs in the government. All the elected officials in Congress and State Legislatures are decided by voting. So are most local representatives, the President, Governors, and Mayors. This is why it is really important that you vote in elections.

When do I vote?

Elections usually take place at the beginning of November every year. Different positions in government have different **terms**. A term is how long someone can serve in government before another election. For example:

- A Senator's term is six years.
- A Representative's term is two years.
- The term for Governors and the President is four years.

Senators and Representatives have no term limits. This means they can keep getting re-elected as many times as they want to run for office. The President can only get re-elected once. This means they can only be President for eight years in total. The term limit for Governors is different in each state. But, most states use the same term limits as the President uses.

Elections for state and federal-level positions usually only happen on even-numbered years. This is because of the way terms are set up. For example, this past election in 2016, and the next one will be 2018. There may be some local elections that happen on odd-numbered years (2017, 2019). You can find out when elections will happen by going to MyTimeToVote.com.

What do I need to do to vote?

Different states have different rules when it comes to voting. Some states say that you need to have a photo ID to vote. For example, a driver's license. Other states say you only need to prove that you live in your state, like by showing a copy of your lease. Some states will let you vote by absentee (sending in your vote through the mail) for any reason. Others only let certain people vote absentee. Find out about the rules your state has by going to Headcount.org's Voter Info page and clicking on your state.

Registering to vote

Many states let you register to vote online. You can also register through the mail by filling out a document called the [National Mail Voter Registration Form](#). You can register to vote in-person by going to a [state or local election office](#). Find out more about registering to vote in your state by going to Vote.gov.

In most states, the deadline to register to vote is before election day. But in some states, you can register to vote by going to your polling place in-person on the day of an election. To do this, you just bring the documents your state asks for when voting (like photo ID or copy of your lease). You can check the deadline to register to vote in your next state election on RockTheVote.com's page about voter registration deadlines.

Where is my polling place?

You can find out where you can go to vote by going to RockTheVote.com's Find Your Polling Place page and entering your address. This information may not be updated until a couple of weeks before an election. Different states also have different hours that polls are open. Check your state's polling hours and make sure that you plan to get to your polling place before the polls close. If you are in line before the polls close, you will be allowed to vote, even if the line is long.

What if I have a problem registering to vote or voting?

If you have a problem with registering to vote or voting, contact your state's **Protection & Advocacy Agency**. Protection & Advocacy Agencies (or P&As) help protect the rights of people with disabilities. The government funds these organizations. [Click here](#) to find the P&A for your state.

ASAN has also released a plain language guide to voting rights for people with disabilities. [Click here to read the guide](#).

How do I learn more about who to vote for?

Candidates for government office usually have their own websites. These websites will usually have statements about what issues are important to the candidate. You can visit these sites to see what candidates have written about issues you care about. But keep in mind that candidates want to say things that will get people to vote for them. They may say things in a way that makes it seem like what they will do is helpful, even if it isn't. So even though these websites can be a good place to start when learning about your candidates, you should also look at other sources.

There are other websites to help you find out more about the people running for elected office. Three websites you can use are:

1. [VoteSmart.org](https://www.VoteSmart.org)
2. [Ballotpedia.org](https://www.Ballotpedia.org)
3. [Vote411.org](https://www.Vote411.org)

You can enter your address on these websites. Then, the site will tell you who the people running for office are. They will also give you a list of how the candidate feels about specific issues. This can help you choose which candidates you want to vote for.

Glossary

Congress

The branch of the federal government that makes laws. It has two parts. These two parts are the House of Representatives and the Senate.

constituent

A person who lives in the area that an elected official represents.

elected officials

The people we elect to represent us in government.

elevator speech

A short speech that you have memorized in case you get a moment with an elected official.

faxing

A way to contact elected officials. You type up a message and send it to the fax number of an elected official. Then, the fax machine in the elected official's office will print out a paper copy of your message.

federal government

The national government of the United States. The federal government makes federal laws that apply to the whole country.

hashtag

Hashtags are a way to group tweets into categories, using the # symbol. For example, #stopthebees.

House of Representatives

One of the two parts of Congress. The House of Representatives has 435 members. Each state has a different number of Representatives based on how many people live in the state.

live-tweeting

Live-tweeting is when someone goes to an event and posts on Twitter what is going on at the event for people who can't be there.

members of Congress

Elected officials who have the power to make federal laws. Senators and Representatives make up the members of Congress.

Protection & Advocacy Agency

Protection & Advocacy Agencies (or P&As) help protect the rights of people with disabilities. The government funds these organizations.

Senate

One of the two parts of Congress. The Senate has 100 members. These members are called Senators. Each state is represented by 2 Senators.

social media

Any website or online resource that you can use to talk to or share ideas with other people. Facebook and Twitter are two major social media websites.

state government

State governments are almost exactly the same as the federal government. State governments are just on a smaller scale. State governments make laws that apply to their states.

term

How long an elected official can serve in government before another election.

tweet

A short post made on Twitter. Tweets have to be 140 characters or fewer.

Twitterbomb

An organized effort by many people tweeting using the same hashtag. Twitterbombs make it so lots of people see tweets with that hashtag.