Tips for Testifying

Positive testimony for pending smokefree or other tobacco control legislation will help generate legislative and public support for the ordinances and help convince your elected officials to vote in favor of the proposal.

Points to Remember:

- Gather relevant information in advance:
  - Do speakers need to sign up to testify?
  - If so, do you sign up online or fill out a card at the meeting?
  - How much time do speakers have to testify? Try to arrange the order of speakers, so that supporters can respond to opposition claims.

- Discuss key messages with other advocates and coalition members ahead of time to determine which messages will move council members who are on the fence to vote in favor of your legislation.

- Prepare your testimony in advance, and keep it brief. You often have only 2 or 3 minutes to speak. Don’t feel compelled to use up the whole time—make your point succinctly and move on.
  - CAUTION: Councils often reduce testimony to just one minute, particularly when there is a contentious item on the agenda or a larger number of speaker requests: prepare both a longer and shorter statement in advance!

- Practice your speech in advance and time yourself to ensure that you do not speak too long.

- Identify the most credible and persuasive speakers on the various topics relating to smokefree policy (e.g., science, personal impacts, economic impact, etc.). Be sure to have workers or residents lined up to speak who are personally impacted by secondhand smoke in their environment—bar or casino workers, musicians, apartment residents, etc.

- Each testifier should stick to one or two points. The coalition should organize testimony ahead of time so that supporters cumulatively cover all relevant issues.

- Pay attention to what other speakers have said, and avoid being repetitious of other speakers and of yourself.

- Pay attention to the elected officials’ body language and their comments to one another and to other speakers. You may be able to modify your testimony to address their concerns.

- Whenever possible, use personal anecdotes to illustrate your point. How has secondhand smoke affected you and those around you? Why is this issue important to you? Just like the general public and the media, elected officials tend to respond to emotion and personal stories.

- Maintain eye contact with the elected officials while testifying.

- Use catchy soundbites and phrases. Elected officials remember them and the press will quote them. Examples: “Your right to smoke stops at the tip of my nose”, or “Workers should not have
to decide between their health and a paycheck", or “The debate is over, the science is clear: secondhand smoke kills.”

- Use visual aids if appropriate. Example: Does the ordinance include big loopholes? Cut holes in the paper containing the ordinance language and while testifying, hold the paper up explaining that the language is full of holes. Have coalition members in audience hold up signs saying, “I support smokefree air!” or “I will not be an Exemption!”

- Be prepared to answer questions about your topic. If you are asked a question for which you do not know the answer, don’t speculate or make up an answer. If possible, defer to another speaker or “expert witness” if you do not know the answer. Otherwise, offer to follow up with the answer.

**Things to Avoid:**

- Avoid being unprepared. Make sure to practice your testimony and review your main points before the hearing.

- Avoid testimony on how smoking harms smokers, especially in smokefree ordinance campaigns. This information is not relevant to smokefree legislation. This is not a smoker versus nonsmoker issue. This ensures that people who smoke do so in ways that do not harm other people.

- Do not be confrontational or threatening to the council or others in the audience! There is a fine line between being assertive and being argumentative. While it can be difficult to take the high road, always be polite, yet confident and firm. We have the science and on-the-ground experience to back our position that smokefree air is good for health and good for business.

- If you have prepared written testimony, do not simply read it. Summarize your point, and provide copies of your testimony to elected officials. Notecards that summarize your points are better than a full speech.

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