

## 5 How can I advocate?

Canadians are blessed to live in a democracy with a vibrant civil society. We have many opportunities and channels to be advocates and to communicate our concerns about and support for certain laws and policies. Below are some examples of how you can get involved.

At the MCC Ottawa Office, we consider advocacy to be a two-sided coin: with political engagement on one side and public engagement on the other. Political engagement involves direct engagement with the political system, and public engagement focuses on influencing public opinion. We include examples of each.

While not an exhaustive list, these are some of the most common, and arguably most effective, ways that ordinary people can do advocacy.

### Political Engagement

- Sign a petition
- Write to a politician
- Meet with your MP
- Phone your MP
- Join a political party

### Public Engagement

- Prepare an “elevator speech”
- Write a letter to the editor
- Engage with social media
- Send out a press release
- Offer a public prayer witness
- Engage in nonviolent direct action



“ This is a time for a loud voice, open speech, and fearless thinking. I rejoice that I live in such a splendidly disturbing time.

*Helen Keller*

## Political Engagement

### 1. Sign a petition

While petitioning first began back in the 18th century, signing a paper petition is still a common form of advocacy today in the 21st century. When citizens add their names to a petition that gets presented in the House of Commons, MPs can see that an issue is important to Canadian voters (particularly if the petition has many signatures!). Many MPs see it as their obligation to present any paper petition they receive from constituents in the House of Commons—this gets an issue on the public record! Politicians appreciate the extra effort that goes into gathering and delivering hand-written signatures.

In recent years, electronic petitions have exploded onto the scene, making it quicker and easier to gather signatures in support of a cause. In November 2015, it became possible to create, sign and send electronic petitions to the House of Commons on the [Parliament of Canada](#) website.

Want to start a petition? Whether you circulate a paper or electronic petition, make sure that you follow the precise guidelines outlined on the website. Paper petitions, for example, should have a minimum of 25 signatures. Electronic petitions need to be supported by five individuals and sponsored by an MP, before they are made available for signing. See a sample petition in the Appendices.

Signing a petition may be a fast and relatively easy to advocate, however, it is not generally as effective in bringing about change as meeting with, writing to or calling a politician. These latter methods speak more directly to those with decision making power, and can allow for conversation around the issue you would like to discuss, whereas petitions can often go unnoticed, especially if not very many people have signed on.

## 2. Write a letter to a politician

Letters are a very helpful means of political engagement because they let you make the case for why you think an issue is important. Make sure you are concise. For instance, even if respecting the treaty rights of Indigenous peoples may warrant a 30-page explanation, for instance, such a lengthy tome will not get read. When writing a letter to a politician, “short and sweet” should be your motto.

Here are a few tips:

- Focus on one topic or issue. Clearly outline your concerns.
- Keep the letter short (ideally 1-2 pages) so that an MP will be sure to read it.
- Use a constructive tone. Be critical but polite.
- If you have credentials or personal experience that would increase your authority, be sure to list these things.

## story

**IN 1981** Titus and Linda Gehman Peachey were serving with MCC in Laos. One day Linda met a farmer whose wife had been killed the previous day as she hoed in the family farm. The mother of 11 was killed instantly by a small cluster munition which had been dropped by U.S. military forces years earlier but had not detonated. The husband asked Linda to take the damaged hoe head back to the U.S. to show people what American weapons were responsible for. Titus Peachey began a lifelong journey to work for a ban on the manufacture, distribution and use of cluster munitions. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of hundreds of campaigners around the world, such an international ban came into being in 2008.

The Canadian government, although a signatory to the treaty which created the ban, was reluctant to ratify the treaty for several years. Moreover, when it did present a ratifying bill in 2011, that bill was



weak and filled with loopholes, allowing for the continued use of cluster munitions in certain circumstances. MCC Canada, together with a coalition of other groups, advocated hard for strengthened legislation. A small victory was achieved in 2014 when the legislation was amended somewhat before the bill passed into law in 2015.

- Consider all the relevant MPs who should receive your letter and shae copies with them. If you are writing to the prime minister, send copies to your MP and to leaders of the opposition parties.
- Make sure to include your full mailing address.
- Review the letter. Have a friend or family member read it over before you send it.

See the Appendices for a sample letter.

Like paper petitions, letters sent by mail—particularly when they are hand-written, rather than typed form letters—still make a greater impact than those sent by email. Hard copy letters also require no postage if they are sent to this address:

Name of Member of Parliament  
House of Commons  
Parliament Buildings  
Ottawa, Ontario  
Canada  
K1A 0A6

If you choose to send your letter by email, you can find email addresses for all politicians here:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>

Speaking with an MP is usually more effective in being heard than writing a letter. However, if you do not have the time to set up a meeting with an MP or if you feel you can express your ideas more clearly through writing, letters can be powerful in communicating a message. This is especially true when MPs receive many letters from many different people or organizations advocating for the same thing.

## 3. Meet with your MP

Believe it or not, MPs don't spend all of their time in Ottawa. In fact, many weeks are set aside in the [Parliamentary Calendar](#) for them to spend time in their ridings and meet with their constituents. A face-to-face meeting with your MP is usually the most effective way not only to advocate, but to build a relationship. They are more likely to remember you and your message if you meet in person; moreover, you will quickly gain a sense of the MP's own views.

However, meeting with an MP does require more time and effort in preparation and delivery than other advocacy methods. Making a good impression, communicating effectively, and coming prepared will open up the door for further advocacy efforts. Going as a group, with one or two other individuals, can make the experience less intimidating and also lend weight to the issue you are concerned about.



“ I cannot change the world but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.

*Mother Teresa*

Here are some tips for meeting with your MP:

#### **Before the meeting**

- **Contact your MP.** Call the MP’s office ahead of time to set up a meeting. Be ready with times that you are free to meet. Be flexible.
- **Prepare your argument.** Do your research, prepare questions, and understand the MP’s stance on the issue.
- **Develop a short brief.** Write a 1-2 page brief that identifies who you are, what you are asking the MP to do, and why you are asking it. You will leave this with the MP.
- **Determine who will do what.** If you are visiting your MP in a group, decide in advance who will take charge of presenting your concerns and what the responsibilities of each group member will be.
- **Plan to keep your pitch short.** MPs are busy, and you may only have 15 minutes for your meeting. Decide beforehand what the crucial information is you want the MP to take away.

#### **At the meeting**

- **Be on time and dress respectably.** Although you have a democratic right to dress as you wish, wearing “business casual” will eliminate any unnecessary distractions that may discredit what you have to say.
- **Focus on only one or two issues.** Although you may have lots of issues to discuss, focus on only one or two, giving precise and clear arguments for your perspective. This will enable you to get your point across, and provide clarity for your MP as to what they can do for you.
- **Share a personal story.** A story or personal experience can lend weight to your arguments.
- **Don’t hesitate to ask kindly for clarification.** MPs don’t always give straight answers, or you may find their arguments unclear. It’s okay to ask for clarity as long as you ask in a respectful tone.

- **Ask what you can do.** Sometimes, if an MP is particularly passionate about an issue or knows someone who is, they can give you resources or suggestions of how best to advocate. So don’t just tell them what they should do; ask them their opinion on what you can do to carry your concern forward.
- **Ask for a response.** If you have made a specific request of your MP, indicate that you would like to hear from them or their staff in the near future.
- **Keep it short.** MPs are busy people, and if you go overtime an assistant will quickly usher you to the door. Keep it short. Keep it sweet.

## story

**FOR OVER A DECADE**, people in many parts of the world have been raising their voice about the practices of Canadian mining companies operating in their communities. They point to human rights violations, environmental destruction, social and economic upheaval, and disregard for the wishes of local communities. Faith-based and civil society groups have been advocating for accountability for mining companies, which frequently operate with impunity. In 2014 the federal government, which had been resisting anything but weak and voluntary mechanisms, finally took steps to implement mandatory reporting for Canadian mining companies. From now on, mining companies would be required to report publicly any payments made to host governments for mining concessions. The story is far from over, but it does demonstrate that the concerted effort of Canadians from many sectors of society has achieved a measure of accountability that has not existed before.

“ Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.

*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

#### After the meeting

- **Make sure to follow up.** Again, MPs are busy people. Be sure to send them an email or call them to thank them for their time. In the future, keep them up to date on what you’re doing about the issue, and remind them of what they may have promised to do.

#### 4. Phone your MP

If you are not prepared to meet with your MP but want to share your view on a particular topic, phone their constituency office. Indicate that you would like to register an opinion and would like it passed on to the MP. An assistant will take your name, contact information, and write up a brief summary of your comments to share with the MP. Make sure that your statement is brief, clear and concise. A phone call does not allow for the building of a relationship, but it is still a very effective method of engaging directly with a decision-maker.

## story

**IN APRIL 2012** the Canadian federal government announced an end to funding health care for refugee claimants. A group of students at Canadian Mennonite University, assigned to develop an advocacy action plan for a class assignment, decided to focus their efforts on this issue. After making contact with other groups also working on the issue, the students developed a “59 cent campaign.” They asked Canadians to mail 59 cents – the amount per citizen required to maintain the health coverage – to the prime minister, along with a message to restore the health coverage. Within a few days, their campaign generated 200 media mentions, and some 350 persons had sent letters with 59 cents. In 2014 a federal court ordered the government to reinstate the original funding. In November 2015 a new government announced the restoration of full funding for refugee health care. The students attributed the success of their campaign to its focus on the value of human life, and to the way they allied their efforts to larger networks.

Calling an MP is especially helpful when an important decision is about to be made in Parliament—the more phone calls an MP receives on the issue, the better! Indeed, if you are calling just prior to a vote in the House of Commons, you should call the MP’s office on Parliament Hill.

You can find phone numbers for your MP’s constituent office and their Parliament Hill office here:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/parliamentarians/en/members>

#### 5. Join a political party

Joining a political party is one of the more underestimated ways you can get involved politically. Becoming a card-carrying member of a political party allows you to do things like vote for and nominate candidates to run for the party (including the party leader), and help shape party platforms. If you believe a particular candidate can make a significant difference, consider volunteering for their election campaign. As a campaign volunteer, you can get involved in distributing literature, organizing events, raising money, making phone calls, or simply talking to people about why you think your candidate should be elected. If you are really keen, you may find yourself helping plan your candidate’s campaign strategy. Or, if you think that you have the gifts, skills and passion for political life, why not consider running for office yourself?

Here are links to the core beliefs, policies, and platforms of the main federal political parties.

[Bloc Québécois](#)

[Conservative Party of Canada](#)

[Green Party of Canada](#)

[Liberal Party of Canada](#)

[New Democratic Party of Canada](#)



## Public Engagement

### 6. Prepare an “elevator speech”

An “elevator speech” is a short succinct way of talking about your issue to get others on board. The name comes from the idea that you should be able to get someone interested in your cause in less time than a normal journey on an elevator. Your elevator speech should explain the problem, what needs to change and why, and how ordinary people can support that change. Practice your speech with friends before you try it out on others. Be prepared to speak clearly in more depth if you are given the opportunity.

### 7. Write a letter to the editor or an article

In a democracy, the purpose of the press is to hold the government accountable by being the “eyes and ears” of the people. Newspapers and media outlets appreciate when citizens weigh-in and offer opinions to ensure their work is factually accurate and that citizens have their voice heard. Writing a letter to the editor can be a great way to influence public opinion on a particular issue. To increase your chances of getting published, here are some tips for writing a good letter to the editor. Make sure your letter:

- Responds to an article and does not just offer an opinion;
- Follows the paper’s guidelines for letters;
- Is short, clear, concise, and thought-provoking. The rule of thumb is 150-300 words maximum.

If you wish to raise a concern about an issue that has not been addressed by the media previously, consider writing an article or opinion piece. Check your newspaper’s guidelines for unsolicited writing. Make sure that you have done your research, know your subject very well, and write clearly. Make sure to have someone read your piece before you send it off.

### 8. Send out a press release

Are you planning a public engagement event or wanting to highlight the important work your group is doing? A press release is a very effective way of getting the word out. The main purpose of a press release is to convince media outlets



that what you have to say is newsworthy. Here are some tips for writing an outstanding press release:

- **Write a catchy headline.** For example: “Peace is power: Hill Times crowns MCC Ottawa as most influential lobbying organization in Canada.” Imagine you have 10 seconds to convince a reporter to look further into your story. The title is likely the first thing they read. Do make sure, though, that your title is not misleading or false (like the one above), or you will quickly lose credibility.
- **Communicate the main points.** Be concise and convincing that your story is relevant. It’s not uncommon for reporters to take things verbatim from your press release and put them into their articles. Therefore, include all of the things you would want people to know (who, what, when, where, why, and how) and communicate them clearly. The goal is to catch the reporter’s eye and make drawing from your piece as easy as possible.
- **Include quotations.** Include an insightful quotation from someone — even yourself — about the purpose of your event or project. This gives your piece a personal touch and lures the reporter into your story. Reporters, especially from local newspapers, also appreciate when you put a local twist on your press release.

“ Relentless incrementalism consists of strings of reforms, seemingly small and discrete when made, that accumulate to become more than the sum of their parts. Relentless incrementalism is purposeful and patterned, not haphazard and unintended. The drip drip drip of individual changes over time carve substantial and planned shifts in the structure and objectives of public policy.

*Ken Battle*

- **Provide extra resources.** Make sure that you make the reporter’s research as easy as possible by attaching a link to your event page or any other literature or websites relevant to your cause. Add a good photo with a caption.
- **Look for allies.** Pay attention to what topics reporters cover, targeting the people you know have worked on the issue you are concerned about. For example, if you’re advocating on refugee issues, look for articles on the topic and see who wrote them. Send your press release to those people. They will be more likely to take a closer look.
- **Be selective.** If you send reporters lots of information about many topics, especially topics they are not interested in, your emails will quickly turn into “white noise.” On the other hand, if particular reporters are used to getting a good story when they hear from you, they’ll pay closer attention when you do get in touch.



See the Appendices for a sample press release.

## story

**FOR MANY YEARS,** Canadian policy required that government-funded food aid programs purchase at least 90 per cent of food within Canada. These programs helped Canadian farmers as much as, or more than, the hungry people for whom the food was intended. Moreover, they often meant that food aid was slow in reaching crisis situations and was often culturally inappropriate – like, for example, when people accustomed to eating rice were offered wheat. In other words, Canada’s international food aid was ‘tied’ to Canadian domestic farm policy. After years of advocacy by the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, this policy was changed and food aid was “untied.” Food assistance could now be purchased wherever it made sense. The “untying” of aid in 2008 contributed to saving thousands of dollars in transport costs, reducing delivery times for food aid in crisis situations, supporting local producers and farmers, and providing more appropriate foods to people needing it.

## 9. Use social media

In our electronically connected world, social media has become a powerful tool for creating social change. The MCC Ottawa Office uses [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and a [weekly blog](#) to engage our supporters, and has found these tools to be very effective in reaching a broad audience. Like anything else, however, there are more and less effective ways to use social media.

In this day and age, using social media effectively requires savvy. People are employed full-time to manage social media platforms for companies, organizations and governments, and they are experts at knowing how to reach the public. So how do ordinary individuals make their voices heard through all of the noise of the internet? It is possible, but it takes practice and dedication.

Here are some pointers to start you off.

- **Don’t use social media to replace other forms of advocacy.** Ideally, social media should be used to enhance, rather than replace, traditional or face-to-face forms of advocacy. For example, using a Facebook event to organize a march, or writing a blog to update the public on the advocacy efforts of your group, are effective uses of social media to propel your advocacy efforts. On the other hand, using Twitter to vent your frustration with politicians without more personal contact is not as effective.
- **Choose only a few platforms and do them well.** Remember, using social media is a skill that needs to be honed. Start with a commonly used platform like Facebook, Twitter, a blog, or a website and make one of them the central hub that all of your other social media platforms link to. Pay close attention to how other individuals or groups use these platforms as advocacy tools by visiting their pages; find out what “works” for them by measuring Likes, Shares and re-Tweets. Follow those who have similar advocacy agendas so you can plug into a like-minded community and collaborate on important shared concerns.



- **Know your goals and exercise caution.** There are plenty of issues to get excited about. However, if you advocate for all of them on social media your voice will become watered down and people will begin to ignore you. Don't share every article that you like. Moreover, think carefully about what you share and how you share it so that your opinions will gain respect and carry weight. If you post articles that are not credible or offer distasteful comments, people will likely keep on scrolling the next time they see your post. You may also be upset by the injustice that occurs around a particular situation. Although it is perfectly okay to feel that way, using social media as an outlet for your emotions is a big deterrent for many readers. Your posts should be thought-provoking, but keep them professional and respectful.

- **Reach your intended audience.** Knowing your audience can be difficult on social media. Messages sent into the worldwide web are accessible to virtually anybody and is therefore difficult to know exactly who your message is reaching. Different platforms can be used to access different groups or individuals. Here are some tips for advocating using specific social media tools and for getting your message across to your intended audience.

**Facebook:**

- Use an organizational Facebook account, as opposed to a personal account which will connect you to your friends and family.
- Use Facebook groups and events to connect like-minded people, create an open forum for discussion or attract more people to a public event.
- Ask your Facebook friends to share your content on their website, blog, Facebook page or other social media accounts.
- Include links and original photos in your Facebook status to increase the chance people will read them.

**Twitter:**

- Follow Twitter accounts that align with your advocacy efforts. This way you get to know the people that may follow you back or retweet you, expanding the audience that will see your message.
- Tweet directly to a politician, an MP or whoever you would like to hear your advocacy efforts.
- Tweet directly to groups or individuals you wish to partner with in your advocacy efforts.

**Using Hashtags:**

- Use hashtags to gain interest from the general public by attracting those who share similar interests. They can be used on a variety of platforms including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.
- Use hashtags that are already well used by other users. Creating original hashtags is not likely to relay your message to a wide audience.
- Don't overdo it: Tweets with hashtags have been found to receive twice as much engagement than those without; however, those with more than two hashtags actually showed a 17 per cent drop in engagement. And let's face it, nobody wants to read this: #Hashtags are essential #to most tweets #but too many #make #tweets #unreadable, especially to #newbies. Why complicate it? #TwitterTips



## 10. Offer a public prayer witness

Gathering in a public place with fellow believers who share a common concern can be a profound and meaningful way to create change. Praying, singing, and lamenting in a public space can strengthen and inspire participants in ongoing advocacy. It can also offer a powerful witness to the public, whether passersby, the media, or elected officials. A public prayer witness or vigil also refutes a common perception that faith has nothing to do with political engagement. Here are some things to think about:

- Gather a group to plan the prayer service. Don't do this alone! Be as inclusive as you can be in pulling together your group.
- Pray together as you plan your prayer witness.
- Choose a site, considering accessibility to public transportation, visibility and symbolic significance. Determine if the site requires a special permit.
- Plan the outline for your prayer witness. Include a variety of elements such as candle-lighting, litanies, scripture readings, songs, poetry, brief reflections, rituals, and moments of silence. Keep the service short, especially if the weather is cold.
- Create a brief and concise leaflet that can be distributed to passersby. Make sure to include contact information.
- Notify the media if you wish to draw that kind of attention. Send a brief press release to media outlets several days in advance and again the morning of your event.
- Delegate responsibilities to specific individuals: worship leader, song leader, speaker(s), media spokesperson, photographer, sound person, etc.
- Anticipate disruptions of your prayer witness. Ensure that a few people — ideally with training or experience — are present to manage conflicts with or disruptions from people who resist your message.

Contact MCC's Ottawa Office for ideas on developing a public peace witness or witness walk.

## 11. Do nonviolent direct action

Advocacy is more than speaking out. We can also advocate through our actions, sometimes with few or no words at all. Nonviolent direct action is a way of drawing attention to and exposing unjust policies and practices through collective and often symbolic action. Some forms of nonviolent direct action include street theatre, marches, strikes, boycotts or sit-ins. Taking time to creatively and publically unmask violence and injustice — whether as an individual or a group — can be a powerful means of conveying a message.



Stories of nonviolent direct action (see story about Pan y Paz) inspire us to take action. The MCC Ottawa Office affirm acts of public witness and nonviolent direct action, and yes, even civil disobedience, but we encourage people to prepare carefully. Acts of civil disobedience (deliberately breaking a law to convey an important message), in particular, should not be undertaken without spiritual discernment, training, and an awareness of possible consequences. Without adequate preparation, nonviolent action may appear reckless or foolish. (see *Story* on page 5.9).

Here are some tips to take into consideration as you prepare to do direct action, in whatever form that may take.

- **Think about place and permissions.** Consider where your event or action is being held. Is it on private or public property? In a busy or not busy place? These are questions to consider to ensure that your event is not only safe but effective. No matter where your action is, make sure to notify people like the police, security, or a manager before showing up. This will prevent the awkward disappointment of finding out that some other event is already happening and there is nowhere to hold yours, or that you're not allowed on the property. Find out if you require a permit or police escort for your event.
- **Choose dynamic speakers.** Effective speakers are central to most action events. Who are the voices that people respect and can learn from? Academics? Community activists? People impacted by crime or poverty (or whatever issue you are seeking to address)? Politicians? Line up a diverse group of dynamic speakers to offer their perspective and wisdom. Encourage these people to keep their speeches short and punchy. No one likes rallies that go on and on.

“ Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.

*Margaret Mead*

- **Incorporate music and or humour.** Music and or humour can help to lighten up your event or activity, without taking away the seriousness of your message. Find ways to incorporate these elements. A group of “[raging grannies](#)” is always fun. Make sure that any political satire remains in good taste. If you are including a walk or march as part of your event, add some drummers or dancers who can lead the group and help to build and maintain energy.
- **Engage the media and social media.** If you have decided that you would like lots of people to participate in your action, use a variety of tools to get the word out. Public Facebook events are becoming the go-to tool for organizing demonstrations; not only do they help spread the word quickly, but if they gain momentum, the media will more likely notice. For more on this topic, see “Send out a press release” (page 5.5) and “Use social media” (page 5.9).
- **Don’t forget equipment and supplies.** Don’t just assume that your speakers will have booming voices; make sure to arrange for a megaphone or microphone. As well, bring along a milk crate or something to elevate the speakers so the crowd can see them. Have a table with supplies like cardboard, wooden sign holders, nails and markers for people to make signs. Seasoned activists will bring their own supplies, but the majority of the crowd will not. Give them the tools to advocate.
- **Prepare for disruptions.** Although most people who attend a demonstration are like-minded in the pursuit of justice, opinions still vary and things can get heated, especially when some folks show up who have a different perspective. Make sure to have a small group of people who are trained to dissipate conflicts that may arise safely and peacefully; this will help to make your event positive and effective. If you plan to perform any sort of civil disobedience, do make sure to know what may happen if you are arrested, and understand the safety hazards and implications of doing so. For example, an arrest or detention on your record can make it much more difficult for you to travel.
- **Consider transportation needs.** If your event or action is to be held outside of an urban area you may have to consider renting a van or organizing carpools for people. If it is in a city, ensure that directions for bus routes, parking, and places to lock bikes are made clear. Making this information known will help your event run more smoothly and make people more likely to come.

## story

**EVERY YEAR ON SEPTEMBER 21** (UN International Day for Peace, Non-violence and Ceasefire), Anabaptist churches across Colombia celebrate and call for peace and justice with a movement called “Pan y Paz” (bread and peace). Pan y Paz brings together communities in nonviolent direct action in a call for an end to violence and the provision of enough food for all. In the village of San Nicholas, a community with many displaced families and desperate youth, members of the Anabaptist congregation Church of the Resurrection gather to pray and prepare, and then lead residents in a march during which they sing, carry signs and candles, and hand out bread to people they meet.

The Pan y Paz march in 2014 was especially poignant, because, just as the congregation was gathering, word came that yet another despairing youth had taken his own life. Subdued by this tragic event, the people felt their message was even more urgent. They wept and prayed for comfort, and then proceeded with their march, carrying candles of hope, messages of peace, and baskets of freshly baked bread. In a context in which a 50-year armed conflict has displaced millions and contributed to hunger, poverty and a culture of violence, the Pan y Paz movement fosters the building of communities of love, peace, mutual support and hope for the future.