



Society Strategies

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The Genealogist's Call to Legislative Action

by

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The recent years' economic downturn has had an equally deleterious effect on public services. City, county, and state governments have cut back on services, most notably, the libraries and archives centers. These repositories and services directly affect the genealogists. It behooves the genealogical community to be knowledgeable about the local political inclinations toward cutbacks on public services, keep a tab on local representatives, attend local town meetings, and keep track of legislative activities in order to avoid last-minute surprises when it's too late to counteract undesirable acts.

This paper outlines the experience of the Colorado genealogists in garnering the interest of the genealogical community for monitoring legislative activities.

Getting Organized

It's helpful to have an established group sponsor the original idea and beginning organizational activities. One society as a sponsoring society should be the springboard of activities. The individuals who are spearheading the movement will organize the steering committee.

Steering Committee

The primary organizers will get together and form a steering committee composed of a core group of interested and committed members. They will

plan ahead: set the next meeting dates, formulate the mission statement, formulate the goals, outline the activities with deadline dates, and generally lay out a plan.

Organizational Meeting

The steering committee will organize and put out a public call for all interested genealogists to attend an organizational meeting for the purpose of organizing persons interested in legislative activities to gather and plan.

At this meeting, interested genealogists will pledge to join the activist purposes of the group.

Invite a Legislator

This first meeting is the best time to invite a legislator to address the group.

At this initial meeting, understanding, from the beginning, how a legislator thinks, how a legislator listens to constituents, and how the legislative process works will get the effort off to the most effective start.

A member of the steering committee would be the best person to determine the choice of whom to invite. Most likely a member of your steering committee already is personally acquainted with a legislator, and feels comfortable making the phone call, emailing a request, or personally asking the

legislator to come to speak to the group.

Explain to the legislator the group's purpose and what they want to learn from the guest. Most importantly, this might be the first time this legislator has heard the word "genealogist" and this will be the first time (of what will be many opportunities) to explain what a genealogist is to a lawmaker.

A legislator meets you and thinks, "this is a voter, I need to pay attention," so when you point out that hundreds, maybe thousands, of genealogists live within the boundaries of his/her district, you immediately have a captive ear.

Now is your chance to explain what a genealogist is, and what the genealogists' interests are in the local records. This legislator is going to meet you personally, talk to and listen to your group, and after the meeting, both parties will have formed an important relationship.

The committee needs to learn from the legislator his/her point of view, and learn the most effective modes of communication in bringing the genealogists' concerns to the legislature.

Questions to the legislator might be:

- "What is the most effective method of communication to you and your colleagues?"
The answers might include a time frame of when to first email the legislator, whether handwritten letters might be more effective, if phone calls might be in order, and the best timing of communications in relation to a Lobby Day event.
- "What information will capture a legislator's attention?"
The answers will include the amount of information to give to the recipient, the salient points you want to get across, the timing of how much information to offer at a time, and the context of information that will gain a legislator's (or the staff's) attention.

In these days of budgetary crisis, realizing that budget concerns are an overriding consideration

to the congressional delegations will help you frame your expectations and wording of your press releases.

If your steering committee determines a course of action you'd like to present to a legislator for enactment, be mindful that couching the bill in terms of cost will determine its likely success or failure. Bills that require no cost will be considered with more seriousness than a bill that will incur costs. A costly measure might be the genealogists' wish to build a new repository or upgrade an existing facility. These days, such an effort may be doomed. A measure such as "an act to open private cemeteries to public access" could be presented as a low cost/no cost measure and may well be considered with seriousness in your legislative community.

The key point of this meeting between the legislator and the lobbyist genealogists is to learn about each other, come to an understanding of both sides' points of view, and undertake a cooperative effort to achieve the goals of both entities.

Match Talent to the Task

The organizational meeting is the time to match talent to task.

Individuals can offer to work in their main areas of interest and talent, such as writing versus meeting people, emailing versus writing, and monitoring legislative activities from home versus public speaking.

There are a varied number of tasks that need to be done:

- **Publicity:** in an immediate timeframe, getting the word out to local and regional groups to recruit more volunteers for the tasks ahead would be a role for the publicity people. This would include sending write-ups to local society newsletters, emailing notifications of the formation of the task force to area genealogists, and generally publicizing the purposes of the group and the need for more volunteers.
- **Writing:** creative writers can volunteer to write

the press releases to be sent to the publicity committee. Writers can create the email releases to go out, and compose the mission statement of the group for inclusion on stationery letterhead.

- Legislative monitors: genealogists who wish to participate in the legislative contact activities can be of use here. This group will compile a list of all the legislators, their party affiliations, their mail addresses, their email addresses, their legislative district boundaries, and web page addresses. Members within this group can subdivide the work into their areas of interest. It's a good idea to create a spreadsheet-style list of the members of the legislature.

An important determination will be to select the person who will be the point person for monitoring the daily legislative activities during the session. Commonly, the Internet is the source of information on the daily activities of the congressional groups at the web page of the state government.

One person could monitor the Senate, another person could monitor the House. These monitors will review the bills as they are introduced, keeping an eye out for bills containing provisions which would impact genealogical records.

Bills of concern to genealogists would include those that reduce research hours in a repository, close a repository, transfer records to another location, or otherwise limit access to a set of records by way of restricting the public access by requiring increased restrictive permissions or more stringent credentials.

Bills that dramatically alter the situation of a particular repository or set of records would certainly warrant drastic action, so a quick and strong response would be imperative. The monitors really need to be on their toes and commit to daily reviews of the introduced bills.

Talking Points

You want to develop the important points you want to convey to the legislators by creating a 'talking points' style of script for volunteers to become familiar with.

Determine the three or four most important items of concern in your genealogical community, and develop two-sentence scripts using the active voice, straight to the point and clearly stated.

For example, you might be considering the adverse ramifications of anticipated reduced closure hours of the library. A wordy, passive voice would read: "The genealogists of the city of _____ would like the legislative committee to know that the diminished hours for access to the library would be detrimental to our interest." Instead, formulate an assertive, but polite, "Thousands of local genealogists oppose restricting library hours. The evening and weekend hours of research in the census, city directories, and newspaper archives are indispensable to our work."

Assertive but Polite

Be proud of your work and challenge your creative writers to express your concerns and wishes in strong, active-voice language with succinct sentences without being offensive, over-bearing or judgmental. The legislators are doing their jobs too, and you may not feel as if you've won any concessions in any of your arguments, but there will be another day to protect your interests, and by introducing yourselves, and creating bridges of communication and cooperation, the journey will be easier at the next go-round.

Lobby Day at the Capitol

In Colorado, lobby interest groups can schedule a day dedicated to their opportunities. Senior citizen groups do this each year, and the genealogists can do this too.

It's a good idea to meet at the beginning of the appointed day, before going out onto the capitol floors.

There are bound to be folks who had promised to

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appear and help, but who don't show up. You may need to reassign some tasks. Make sure there are plenty of handouts. Review the assigned tasks and the routes of visitation, and make sure everyone is in concert as to the general points and wording of introductions.

Use the capitol maps and assign routes to specific people. You don't want to appear foolish when one team introduces themselves in a legislator's staff and another team appears to repeat the same essential conversation. The genealogists will appear disorganized.

You're bound to come across legislators or staff who do know genealogy. This is your chance to maximize the opportunity to establish a bond and thread of conversation that establishes familiarity and good relations.

After rounds have been made and the tasks completed, gather the team for a brief debriefing. Identify the offices which seemed especially receptive to the teams. Write down the names of strong contact possibilities while the conversations are fresh in everyone's minds.

After the Lobby Day, gather the team for a debriefing to review the mistakes, the successes, and outline a plan for next year.

It's interesting and beneficial to get to know the congressional representatives who are in a position to pass laws that may close or not close the doors to genealogical records.

Make friends at the capitol this year, and continue to lobby your interests and when the time comes when you need your voices to be heard, they will be.

About the author:

Roberta "Bobbi" King is a Colorado genealogist who has served as an officer, board member and volunteer for various genealogical societies. She was Co-Coordinator for the Colorado Public Records and Access Task Force 2010.

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