

## **GIVING TESTIMONY AT A PUBLIC HEARING**

A public hearing is usually held when public officials at the city, county, state, or federal level wish to formally request comments on a bill or issue. These meetings are sometimes required by law before a regulation or statute can be approved. In many jurisdictions, public hearings must be advertised in local newspapers for a specified time prior to the date of the hearing.

In other cases, it is necessary for NASW-PA to closely monitor the progress of legislative activity to know if a hearing will be held. The laws vary per state regarding notification of hearings and options of holding hearings. Often when a city, town, or county holds a public hearing; NASW-PA will register a desire to testify or simply appear on the appointed day and request the opportunity to speak.

### **Preparing Testimony**

Often if it is not a personal story that a volunteer is giving as testimony, NASW-PA staff either at headquarters or the state office writes the testimony. It is necessary to write two papers, one for submission to the written record and the other an oral summary of the written testimony.

The latter should be very brief, usually no longer than one page and should cover only the major points of the testimony. The advocacy staff in the state office should prepare sufficient extra copies of the statement so that they may be passed out to the committee, those attending the hearing and sent to the news media. The committee may want to notify the media, especially if large numbers of people are expected to attend.

Before the actual writing of testimony, research must be done using statistics to substantiate arguments and suppositions. Generally, testimony answers the following questions:

What is the need?

Who is involved?

What are the possible solutions?

Which is the preferable solution and why?

What is the practicality of the preferable solutions? Cost?

The testimony should accomplish two objectives: first, let the officials holding the hearing know why NASW-PA supports or opposes the proposed legislation and what its effect on the social work profession, the clients they serve, or the general population will be; and second, build public opinion in favor of NASW-PA's position by citing convincing evidence.

This can be accomplished by presenting specific and concrete examples of how the proposal will affect NASW-PA members and social workers in general.

### **Giving Testimony**

The testimony should begin with greetings to whomever you are presenting the testimony with special salutations to the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, and the members; and then give thanks for the opportunity to speak and congratulations to the body holding the hearings.

It should then state who you are, whom you represent including numbers of NASW-PA members and why you are appearing to give testimony. Cite facts and figures. Try to anticipate questions and be responsive to them in your testimony. Then give your testimony, which should answer the

questions from the outline above. Conclude with a summary, a plea for action, and again then thank whoever is hearing testimony.

### **Other Considerations**

If the option is available, the advocacy staff should consider where they would like NASW-PA to be placed on the hearing schedule although there is no guarantee that you will be given the place you ask for. It may be helpful if placed toward the end of a hearing, as in that slot you will have an opportunity to hear the arguments used by the opposition and the questions asked by the legislators on the committee. The person testifying can mentally prepare answers and a rebuttal to the opposition's arguments. Sometimes, legislators are inclined to remember most clearly the last speaker they hear during testimony.

That said: if testimony has the potential to be newsworthy, requesting to speak first would be best. The initial witness almost always has the attention of the audience and a better chance for news coverage. A well-filled hearing room makes a good impression on all elected officials.

To demonstrate widespread interest in the proposed legislation, NASW-PA staff might invite members to attend the meeting. If multiple hearings are anticipated over a span of time, a mass e-mail and the telephone tree may be utilized to alert members quickly when their presence would be helpful at a hearing.