



CAMP AND GOVERNMENT

How your ministry can benefit from engagement with elected officials

Government relations should be as much a part of your camp or conference center management routine as taking care of your teeth is to your health. It might not be a joy, but it should at least be a habit.

Unfortunately, most camp and conference ministries avoid getting involved with government and its agencies just like some people dodge the dentist — and it can often lead to similar results: entirely avoidable issues that can get ugly, expensive and painful. ▶



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Typically, if a camp or conference center suddenly decides to engage in government relations, it's because there is a crisis — a new law is passed or regulation handed down that poses a threat — and ministries find themselves scrambling for a fix without the necessary relational capital or procedural know-how to be effective, much less effective *quickly*.

There is a better way.

Camp and conference centers would be well-served to make it a top priority to establish and maintain good relationships with elected officials and regulators — and to do it now when it doesn't seem necessary.

A Worthwhile Time Investment

You may be thinking, “We don't have time for this!” Government affairs can seem like a distraction from your core mission of running your camp or conference center. I get it. We are often already too busy and stretched too thin in terms of time and resources.

However, the government is very much a part of your ministry whether or not you acknowledge it. Government helps shape the environment in which you conduct your ministry and run your business. If you are not a part of that process, you are ceding tremendous authority to others.

Your organization already intersects with the government in some way out of necessity. Perhaps you benefit from certain tax exemptions. You may have a license to operate, overseen by a state or local agency. Fire or health departments may make regular inspections of your facility. State or local agencies probably promulgate rules and regulations that affect how you operate. Whether you've thought of it this way or not, these instances are “government relations.”

Being Proactive

It's not a question of *if* you will have relationships with governing bodies, but rather *how* and to *what extent*. Government's reach into your ministry can happen *with you*, or it can happen *to you*. In my experience, government relations can be proactive, done thoughtfully and with purpose and mission, or they can be reactive, done chaotically in a panic, often resulting in unnecessarily adversarial interactions.

It may seem counterintuitive, but the best time to begin developing a relationship with your state legislators or regulatory agencies is when you don't need anything.

How much better it is to start a relationship with “Come see how we are serving the community,” rather than “Hi, you don't know me, but I need your help — quickly!” Give lawmakers a chance to know you and your ministry, not because you have your hand out, but because you have your arms open.

What Government Relations Look like

To get started, here are six tips to help you begin the journey toward building relationships with governing officials in your area:

- 1. If you feed them, they will come.** Ask to meet your legislators for lunch or a cup of coffee. If your facility has on-site food service, consider inviting them to visit you for a meal to witness your ministry in action.
- 2. For everything, there is a season.** Developing a new relationship will be easier if it is done outside the most intense times for elected officials — campaign season and legislative session. You will get more time and attention from your elected officials if you can approach them during a slower period.

3. Know your limits. While you should be in the clear to spend time developing and maintaining good relationships with elected officials and regulators, there may be limits on the amount of time or resources you can spend advocating for/against specific laws or rules. Check with your legal counsel or someone familiar with lobbying laws in your state for specifics.

4. Politicians are people, too. Only 11 states have full-time legislatures. That means for the vast majority, being an elected official is only part of their life. Many legislators have other jobs or roles in the community. As a result, they recognize they are not subject matter experts in every area and rely on input from constituents like you. Do not be intimidated about making contact with your elected officials. Remember, they work for *you* and ultimately hope to earn your vote in the future!

5. Put party aside. Christians are both Democrats and Republicans. The same goes for nonbelievers. Just because a legislator belongs to a different political party than you does not mean you can't develop meaningful, understanding relationships. Leave politics aside and communicate about your work, the impact you are having, any concerns you have and ways you can help each other.

6. Serve. Many state agencies have boards or committees that review proposed rules and regulations before they go into effect. Volunteer to serve on one of these committees. If committee service isn't an option, agencies usually host listening sessions for those affected by proposed changes to provide input. Attend these meetings and be constructive in your feedback. Become a trusted resource for lawmakers and agency personnel.



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Build Meaningful Relationships

It's easy to think of "the government" as a nameless, faceless entity. In reality, the government is "for the people, of the people, by the people." Legislators and agency employees are just that — people. So government relations means fostering good relationships with people who happen to work in government.

Like all relationships, legislative and agency relationships are built on trust, respect and dare I say, love — recognizing in the other person the inherent worth — the *imago Dei* — within them. Who knows? It just might be that, like Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, your attempts at government relations lead to a life-changing ministry opportunity.

With rare exception, legislators run for office out of a desire to make a difference. They take time away from their families and jobs because they see value in public service. They aren't making mountains of money, and they often make people mad with their decisions. (Rarely do constituents write to thank legislators, but they don't hesitate to register complaints!)

This is even more true for people employed by state agencies. People in these jobs get none of the notoriety or celebrity that comes with being an elected official, but twice the workload and all of the blame if things go wrong. They are there to make an impact and believe their actions are for the health, safety and well-being of others. Acknowledge this at the outset of your relationship and you'll be well on your way to establishing a good, trustworthy working dynamic. ■

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