

We appreciate your interest in supporting legislation to help children and families. While testifying at a public hearing may seem intimidating, elected officials are regular people just like you. To help ensure you have a smooth experience and are prepared, check out the below tips.

What is a public hearing?

The purpose of a public hearing is to educate and inform a committee of the Legislature regarding bills it is considering. In addition to the bill author and applicable state agencies or advocacy groups providing testimony, the public is allowed to testify at these hearings to:

- Express support for or opposition to a bill
- Share how the bill affects them or others
- Highlight unintended consequences of a bill
- Suggest improvements to a bill



How should I prepare?

Like any other type of public speaking, preparation is important. Familiarize yourself with the bill by reading about it, talking to others about it, and reading the bill itself. As you prepare your testimony, there are a few things to remember:

Be concise. Testimonies should be no more than five minutes. In long hearings, the chair may limit testimony to only three minutes.

Make it personal. Tell the committee how the bill would affect you or how you came to be personally concerned about the subject.

Write talking points. Organizing your main thoughts on paper will allow you to remember what you wish to speak about while also allowing you to interact with the committee.

Practice. Whether in be in front of family, friends, or the mirror, practice will help you feel more comfortable and less nervous.

What do I do when I arrive?

You will need to go to the room that was listed on the public hearing notice or agenda. If you need help finding it, there is an informational desk on the first floor in the rotunda.

When you get to the public hearing, you will need to fill out a hearing slip with your name and whether you are testifying in favor, opposition, or for information only. Once completed, you will hand the slip to the messenger before taking a seat and waiting to be called.

We **encourage you to arrive early** if interested in testifying as when you arrive can impact the order in which you are called.

How will I know when it is my turn to speak?

The committee chair opens the meeting by striking the gavel and calling the committee to order. The first thing they will do is take roll call and handle any preliminary business. They will then announce the bill(s) to be heard.

The pattern of the hearing is typically:

Bill's author: explains the purpose of the bill and what it does.

Subject matter experts: These individuals are likely to be opponents of the bill and include individuals such as:

- The state agency that will have to implement or enforce the bill's provisions
- Lobbyists who helped develop the bill
- Other experts

Remaining speakers: This includes private citizens, and the order typically alternates between those in favor of the bill and those opposed to the bill, as called by the chair. Other speakers commonly include:

- Lobbyists, representing businesses, trade associations, and citizen organizations
- Local government officials
- Small business owners
- Private citizens

It is important to know that there is no typical length for a hearing. Some last only a few minutes, while others can last all day. The length depends on how many bills are being heard, how long the testimony is, and how many questions committee members ask.

What do I do when I am called?

You will take a seat in the witness chair, which is usually a separate table. If there is only one table in the room, it is typically at the end of the table.

Once the chair acknowledges you, **thank them** and present your testimony. It is important that you **use eye contact** while speaking. Try not to read your testimony if you typed it out. Instead look at the committee members while sharing your storying – this will help engage them and make them listen.

Will they ask me questions?

Maybe. The purpose of a hearing is to educate the committee members. Some members may have a deep understanding of the issue, while others may not. Additionally, some questions from committee members will be more a statement than a question. You do not need to respond but may take the opportunity to comment further.

What else should I know?

Be respectful to everyone in the room. Applause, cheering, booing, waving signs, or other expressions of sentiment are not allowed.

You may be on television. The WisconsinEye Network broadcasts many legislative hearing live, and records other for later broadcast.

Legislators may come and go. Multiple hearings may be going on simultaneously. In this case, a legislator may move between the two hearings. When this occurs, the legislator's staff is taking notes and collecting written testimony for them.

You might have to wait. There may be other bills on the agenda. Additionally, the chair may not take bills in the order they are listed on the meeting notice.

This guide was developed using the [A Citizen's Guide to Participation in the Wisconsin State Legislature](#) prepared by the Wisconsin Legislative Council Staff in 2017.

