



CASEWORK NAVIGATOR

Give your team the tools they need to excel at casework.



CASEWORK BASICS

AGENCY CORRESPONDENCE

developed by



AGENCY CORRESPONDENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Agency correspondence is at the core of how casework happens. After completing the intake process, the caseworker sends an inquiry to the correct agency, and corresponds with that agency through any additional clarifications and steps until the case is resolved.

When a Congressional office engages in casework, it leverages two important advantages: the Member's name on the letterhead and the casework staff's network of agency contacts. Building professional working relationships with agency liaison staff is critical to a casework team's success.

This chapter addresses how to build agency relationships, tips on working with agencies, staying accountable in this phase of the casework process, and more.



BUILDING AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS

Finding Agency Contact Information

Unfortunately there are no comprehensive sources of contact information for federal agency liaison. However, these are solid starting points:

01 Congressional Research Service

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) hosts a list of the main liaisons for most federal agencies on their website. This is an invaluable starting point for new offices. For some smaller agencies, these contacts will be sufficient for most inquiries. For larger agencies, the liaison staff at the central offices will often be able to provide updated contact information for regional and local offices, processing centers, and other entities that caseworkers will need to communicate with.



02 State delegations

Most caseworkers are generous about sharing their lists of individual agency staffers. Working with members of the state or regional delegation is a helpful way to get local contacts.



03 National caseworker groups

There are several national Microsoft Teams groups and Signal chats that allow caseworkers around the country to connect and share information. These include separate groups for House and Senate staff, issue-specific groups, and party-specific groups. These groups are great places to find obscure agency contacts or even contacts at private businesses when necessary. Delegation colleagues can help with access to these chats.



04 Media email

Sometimes caseworkers hunting down specific contacts can get really stuck. In these cases, checking to see if the agency, office, or company has a listed media contact is sometimes the best resort. While this shouldn't be the first move, it can help secure a response when there are no other options.



No matter where agency contact information originates, it is important to keep it organized. This may be through a CMS platform, spreadsheet, a contact management program, or any other way of organizing contacts, but ideally it should be searchable and in a format that allows notes on which agency contacts are helpful for which types of cases.




Working with Agencies

With few formal legal guidelines for how casework should work on either the Congressional or the agency side, much of Congressional casework is about discretion. Showing professionalism and respect for the complex work agency counterparts do is vital for keeping that relationship in working order.


These nine rules will help with developing and maintaining agency relationships:





 Keep agency contact information confidential


 Start off on the right foot

 Understand that all agencies work differently

 Treat liaisons as members of your team, not adversaries

 Understand where your liaisons are coming from

 If you have to escalate, keep it professional

 Make it a two-way street

 Recognize jobs well-done

 Hand off for success



01 Keep agency contact information confidential

Agency liaison contact information on the CRS list is only available to staff with access to the Congressional network. As noted at the beginning of this section, access to Congressional-facing agency contacts is one of the most important tools a caseworker has. If agency contact information gets out to the public, agency liaisons can get swamped by direct inquiries, increasing response times and often prompting a change of contact numbers or email addresses.

This is not a hypothetical: some liaison teams with offices in the Capitol who have had their information released on the internet spend valuable time managing phone calls, conspiracy theories, and walk-ins from the public. This disrupts the liaison team's workflow, resulting in additional stress for the liaison teams, and poorer-quality service to Congressional offices and constituents. This can also be a safety issue, as liaison offices and staff can be subject to threats and harassment.

Information received from an agency contact should not be forwarded to the constituent without removal of contact information. This can be done with software or simply by having an intern print a response and go over the contact section in permanent marker followed by white-out, then re-scan. Email content should be shared only by copying and pasting the body into a separate message rather than simply forwarding the message from the agency.

02 Start off on the right foot

The first interaction with an agency liaison sets the tone for the relationship. Starting off with a polite introductory email or phone call is a nice gesture, and can also help liaisons identify valuable resources to get new caseworkers up to speed on their agency.

One of the most difficult parts of a liaison's job is working with uninformed caseworkers. To serve constituents well, it is the casework team's responsibility to understand the basic parameters of programs that come up frequently. That baseline understanding will help the team tailor inquiries to get a response more quickly, and help agency staff spend their time looking into problems instead of explaining programs.

Many agencies host regular caseworker trainings and provide manuals and other onboarding resources for new Congressional caseworkers. But even for existing caseworkers who know agencies and programs well, the rules always change. This means it is always valuable to attend agency information sessions and stay on top of updates. For especially sticky or time-sensitive areas, agencies are often willing to set up a short briefing for the delegation to answer your questions efficiently.



03 Understand that all agencies work differently

Agency processes can differ wildly. For new caseworkers or caseworkers tackling a new agency, it is important to take the time to ask agency liaisons for insight into their processes.

For current caseworkers, it can be helpful to periodically zoom back from interactions and ask agency liaisons, “is this how you would like inquiries like this handled in the future?” This not only helps to inform the best way to route a case, but also shows respect for the agency’s staff and processes.

Delegation colleagues are good sources for the inside scoop on individual contacts: Who is friendly by phone, but prickly over email? Which field office will get back to you the same day, and which one wants the full 14 days? Finding the gaps between the agency’s stated preferences and how inquiries really work can be a telling source of information in itself.

04 Treat liaisons as members of your team, not adversaries

When Congressional liaisons are asked what they wish caseworkers knew, there is a common refrain: “we’re on the same side.”

While it might be tempting to hold liaison counterparts personally accountable for issues experienced by constituents, liaison staff are in the same position as Congressional staff — they have to hunt down problems and hold members of their own agency accountable. Approaching each interaction in good faith and appreciating shared goals can create a solid foundation for these professional relationships.



05 Understand where your liaisons are coming from

As federal agencies have grown and gotten more complex over the last few decades, demand for casework help has skyrocketed. That not only affects caseworkers, but also the agency liaisons tasked with handling casework inquiries. There is often enormous pressure on agency liaison staff to keep Congressional “customers” happy, even as the volume of incoming inquiries mounts higher and higher.

Since the mid-2010s, many Executive-branch agencies have also seen skyrocketing staff turnover, and this has trickled up to Congressional liaison positions. New agency liaisons may be thrown into their jobs without substantial training in how to handle Congressional inquiries. Working with the state delegation to politely but firmly explain the expectations around responses to Congressional inquiries, escalating if necessary, will help preserve working relationships.

06 If you have to escalate, keep it professional

No matter how good relationships are with agency counterparts, there will be times that require pressure on behalf of a constituent: maybe responses don’t sufficiently address the problem, or the case is urgent enough to require circumvention of normal inquiry procedures.

The key to escalating an inquiry without having it ruin agency relationships is to be calm, measured, and consistent. Unless the agency liaison staff member has personally done something egregious, keeping inquiries professional and focused on the facts of the case and the constituent’s circumstances will almost always be the most productive approach.



07 Make it a two-way street

Even on day one, a Congressional office has a voice of authority, deep relationships in the community, and a wealth of resources to help communicate with constituents. While casework mostly involves asking liaisons for help, it is helpful occasionally to turn the tables to ask if there is anything that the office can do to make the liaison's job easier, from distributing informational materials to spreading the word about program filing deadlines.

Checking in frequently with liaison staff can be helpful — whether a quick call to ask how the liaison is doing or asking if there is anything that the team can do to help make constituent inquiries easier or be helpful beyond casework. This is a nice way to jointly troubleshoot, raise any problems in a non-confrontational manner, and demonstrate a commitment to working together to help constituents.

The highest compliment a team can receive for your professionalism is when agency liaison staff reach out with their own casework with other agencies.

08 Recognize jobs well-done

Take the time to say thank you, when agency liaisons go above and beyond to help a constituent. A handwritten card from the caseworker (or in special cases, from the Member) can mean a lot. A card at the end of the year saying thanks is also a nice touch. The office could consider sending a formal commendation when liaisons retire or change positions.

For truly exceptional work, nominating liaison contacts for awards like the Partnership for Public Service's [Service to America medal](#) is a wonderful way to recognize their work and highlight the importance and value of casework liaisons within agencies

09 Hand off for success

When it's time to move on to other things, caseworkers should take the time to set up the next caseworker for success by communicating the transition to agency contacts, providing a warm handoff and preparing for a smooth transfer of information. This includes making email accessible to managers so they can catch any inquiries that are mistakenly routed to former caseworkers.



Agency Whistleblowers

There may be instances where a team receives “whistleblower” communication from a staff member at a Federal agency. According to the House Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds, a [whistleblower](#) is:

“

An individual who discloses evidence of wrongdoing, regardless of whether subsequent retaliation occurs [...]. The legal definition in civil service law [1] for a whistleblower is an employee, applicant or former employee who discloses information that he or she reasonably believes evidences:

- *A violation of law, rule or regulation;*
- *Gross mismanagement;*
- *A gross waste of funds;*
- *Abuse of authority; or*
- *A substantial and specific danger to public health or safety.*

Contrary to popular belief, an individual who discloses suspected wrongdoing does not need to experience retaliation to meet the legal definition of a whistleblower. Moreover, some individuals may better identify with the term “truth-teller” or “watchdog” for instance. Most whistleblowers simply perceive themselves as committed employees performing their jobs. Executive Order 12731, issued in 1990, requires all federal employees to disclose waste, fraud, abuse, and corruption to appropriate authorities.

”

Not all employees reporting wrongdoing have the same (or any) whistleblower protections, but Congressional offices, and especially casework staff, should still be aware of legal restrictions and guidelines around handling whistleblower disclosures.

House offices are encouraged to reach out to the [Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds](#) to schedule a training for casework staff. While there are no official whistleblower resources in the Senate, Senate teams can peruse publicly available [resources](#) from the House’s website to inform Senate processes.



STARTING AGENCY INQUIRIES

Interactions with agency contacts are more art than science. As teams gain experience in specific portfolios, working with local and regional liaison staff, they will learn the best ways to frame and send inquiries to set cases up for the best possible chance of success.

Agency inquiries should be written up as soon as possible after intake with the constituent. It can be helpful for the office to establish a goal policy for timing to get the Privacy Act release form and send an initial agency inquiry (and confirming to the constituent).

Representing Your Constituent's Story

Most inquiry letters start with background on the constituent's problem. The Senate Ethics manual (p. 307) reminds caseworkers to consider that they have only heard *one* side of a possibly complex story:

“

When communicating with an agency, Members and staff should only assert as fact that which they know to be true. In seeking relief, a constituent will naturally state his or her case in the most favorable terms. Moreover, the constituent may not be familiar with the intricacies of the controlling administrative regulations. Thus, a Member should exercise care before adopting a constituent's factual assertions.

”

Language that makes the constituent's version of the story clear can be helpful: for example, “Mr. Jones stated that he attempted to meet with supervisors at the local field office on four separate occasions,” or “Mrs. Bonaventure's understanding is that even though she mailed her appeal before the deadline, it has been rejected because it was not opened in a timely manner by the processing center.”



Finding Out the Ask

The most important part of an inquiry letter is the ask. While the intake process focused on understanding a constituent's final goal, the goal for the inquiry to the agency is often not to jump straight to that request, but to take the first step toward getting the constituent there.

01 Cases where the constituent's understanding of the situation may not be clear

For cases where the constituent's understanding of the situation may not be entirely clear, a good first step is often to ask for information. For example, a caseworker could ask for "an update on the current status of this case, timeline for resolution, and any additional information that our team or the constituent may provide to facilitate the case's timely resolution."

02 Cases where the problem is clear from the outset

If the problem is clear from the outset, a good step is to ask for the constituent's options to resolve the situation. For example, after describing the problem, a caseworker could request something like "I am writing on behalf of CONSTITUENT to inquire whether [HE/SHE] has any options consistent with applicable law, rules, and regulations to [expedite this case/ensure that all submitted documents are included with her file/etc]." Another helpful way of framing a case like this is to ask if any additional information is needed from the constituent to resolve a case that seems stuck: "I am writing on behalf of CONSTITUENT to inquire whether [he/she] may be able to provide any additional information needed for her case to receive full and fair consideration in a timely manner."

03 Cases where the constituent asks for help with an agency action in progress

For constituents that ask for help with an agency action in progress, the office can also ask that "Congressional interest" be noted in the case, and/or that the case be given "full and fair consideration consistent with applicable law, rules, and regulations" (Senate Ethics manual, p. 307-8). The expectation when noting Congressional interest is that the Congressional office will be kept updated as the constituent's case moves, and be provided with a copy of the final response. At the agency's discretion, cases with noted Congressional interest may receive a slightly higher-level review, due to the agency's policies on review for any Congress-facing correspondence; this does not have any impact on the outcome of the case.



04 Cases with a complex agency action in progress

Another option for help with a complex agency action in progress is to track a constituent's case through multiple internal agency handovers. For example, for an Aid and Attendance case, once decided in the constituent's favor, must pass through the fiduciary processing center to finally release benefits and retroactive payments. This requires the case to move through multiple processing centers, creating multiple checkpoints where the case can fall through the cracks. To keep the case moving, a caseworker could reach out to the next step in the chain to confirm that they have received the constituent's case: "I am writing on behalf of [CONSTITUENT] to request confirmation that your [PROCESSING CENTER] has received their application for [BENEFIT]. Please do not hesitate to let me know if additional information is needed from [CONSTITUENT] to finalize this application." For complex or urgent cases, this level of hand-holding can prevent a constituent's case from falling through the cracks.

There are many possible options for this first inquiry. It is important to keep in mind the rules of engagement from Ethics around what can and can't be requested and always default to asking for status, information or the constituent's options if unsure.

When to Email, Call, or Mail

For some cases and agencies, it may make the most sense to start out with a phone call. For example, for Post Office cases, an issue with local mail routes and delivery will be best handled by the postmaster for that office, rather than the overarching USPS Congressional Liaison in DC.

It can also be helpful to give a friendly agency contact a call before sending a formal inquiry: for example, if the inquiry is especially urgent, giving a heads-up that it will need expedited can help make sure the inquiry gets picked up quickly out of the liaison's queue. Alternatively, if the case is unclear from the constituent's story and documentation, it can sometimes be helpful to run it by a friendly agency contact for their insight into what might be happening, and what type of ask in the inquiry will help them help you and your constituent get a case to move.

On the other side of the spectrum, for very formal processes where there is a single centralized processing center and/or the office will only be noting interest (for example, some military records correction cases, or higher-level administrative review cases), it may be appropriate to mail out a hard copy inquiry so that it can be more easily included in the constituent's file. Again, it's always worth checking with the agency for how they prefer inquiries to be submitted.



FOLLOWING UP

Setting Inquiry Timelines

As discussed in the chapter on intake, setting goals and clear timeframes is vital to building trust with constituents and keeping casework moving—but an office will have less control over the timeline when it comes to agencies. By this point, constituent cases will likely be open in the CMS system, so caseworkers can work with case “deadlines” to keep on task and hold an agency accountable.

As caseworkers develop expertise in the agencies in their portfolios, they will start to get a sense for how long it takes each one to reply—and again, it never hurts to ask contacts when to follow up (although that response should sometimes come with a grain of salt). To keep everyone on the same page, it is helpful to include expected follow-up dates on initial inquiry: for example, “I will plan to follow up if I have not received a response from your team within 14 days,” or “I respectfully request that you provide a response to the inquiry above within 30 calendar days.”

The purpose of including the date in the initial inquiry, rather than setting a strict deadline for the agency, is really about setting an expectation for follow up. Of course, if there are specific deadlines in the case that require a response before a specific time, or if the case requires expediting, then change this date accordingly.



Keeping the Constituent in the Loop

Where possible, it's also helpful to keep constituents updated, rather than waiting for the assigned next contact date. A quick email to say "I heard from the agency that they confirmed receipt of our inquiry, still expecting a response within X days so I will follow up if I haven't heard anything by DATE," does a lot to make casework visible to constituents, and help them trust that their lawmaker is working hard on their behalf and being as transparent with them as possible.

From there, communicating expected timelines and responses can do a lot to build trust and keep constituent communication at a reasonable frequency. Explaining to the constituent that this agency usually takes 14 days to respond, or that the office has requested a response within 30 days (even sending a copy of the initial inquiry letter, with contact information for the agency redacted), sets expectations for when they will hear back, or when they should follow up.

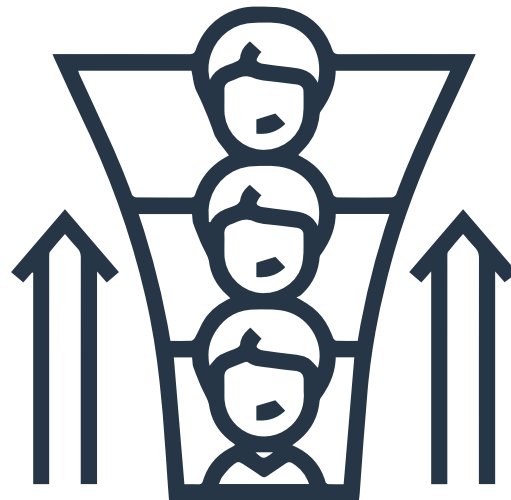
Almost all constituents want their case to be top priority, and there might be some pushback on timelines. It can be helpful to remind constituents that timeframes have been negotiated with agencies to keep this process fair to all constituents in all Congressional offices. Clear policies for when cases can be expedited (see the intake chapter) can also be helpful for putting timelines in perspective.



Escalating Cases

Despite best efforts and good faith, there will be times when the normal process is inadequate. For example:

- Not hearing back from an agency contact in a reasonable timeframe, even after following up through multiple channels;
- An agency response does not address the constituent's problem or question, even after multiple attempts to clarify the scope and purpose of the inquiry;
- There is a clear problem with how a case is being handled, or
- A particularly dire and urgent circumstance demands immediate attention.



Escalation is pushing a case out of normal channels to demonstrate the urgency and interest the office has in the case, and to try to get a response in a timely manner.

Escalating an inquiry can happen both on the Congressional side (going up the chain of command within an office) and on the agency's side (up the chain of command for the agency). For example, if there is no satisfactory response from the field office, a caseworker might reach out to the regional office, and from there to the central office, or go up the chain of command at each step (depending on the urgency of the case). When a case gets to the point of escalation, it is important to have a clear written record — either through written correspondence or an email exchange documenting interactions that take place by phone.

Escalation within a Congressional office may involve bringing the district director or chief of staff in for follow up by phone. Further escalation could involve a call from the Member to the head of the field office, or to a regional director. When a Member gets involved, it is important that they be thoroughly briefed on the case and ideally that the caseworker is on the call or in the room when the call takes place.

If there is no acceptable movement after these escalatory steps, the team may consider following up with the committee of jurisdiction, or considering media coverage of the agency's lack of response.

It is important that any escalation respects Ethics rules discussed in a previous chapter that prohibit improper pressure for an agency to rule a certain way. Furthermore, agency communications should remain professional and based on the facts of the case, citing written agency correspondence or policies where possible.



Record-keeping and Responsiveness

Casework recordkeeping is a challenge, especially due to the myriad systems used to manage cases: between phone calls, emails, snail mail, walk-ins, faxes, and more, there are a lot of pieces of information and correspondence to manage. The best way to keep track of casework is to keep all case records in one place, no matter the method of communication. This makes it easier to find that one specific thing the agency said fourteen months ago when needed and helps to make the process smoother if a case needs to be transferred to another caseworker.

For most offices, that one place will be the constituent's case in the office's CMS platform. While specific features of each CMS platform differ, the tips below can help casework team stay organized:

01 Phone Calls

For calls with agency contacts, it's especially important to make sure that notes capture in detail anything discussed, especially action steps. Developing a system for accurate notes and written follow-up can be especially valuable if the agency contact suggests a course of action or makes a promise about how the case will be handled that does not come to pass. Ifollowing up after a phone call with agency contacts with a short written summary of what was discussed or agreed is ideal. This doesn't have to be formal and legalistic, but can be a short thank-you email with a quick summary and follow-up (e.g. "I look forward to hearing from you on the case for Mr. Jenson after you have a chance to speak with your supervisor on Thursday. Many thanks for your follow up.").



For constituent calls, the same is true. Keeping accurate records of who called whom, what was discussed, and any next steps will help the team stay organized and prevent the "but you told me..." conversation. The same goes for in-person meetings with constituents: as soon as possible afterwards, it is helpful to write down a short summary of the visit, including any action steps agreed on, any concerns and questions from the constituent, and any other general notes on the interaction.

As important as the calls received can be the calls that are missed. It can be helpful to include missed calls and voicemails in CMS case notes on constituents and agencies reach out. Some CMS systems make it possible for interns to make notes, for example, "Ms. Cruz called at 11am; told CASEWORKER was unavailable, asked for a call back to see if there was an update from the agency after 3pm today if possible. No change to phone number in file."



02 Email

Since so much agency correspondence happens over email, keeping text from emails organized in your CMS is vital to keeping complete records. The team can either copy-and-paste email text into the CMS as emails come in (including the caseworker’s replies—which are sometimes as helpful for documenting agreements as what the agency contacts say), or download email chains and upload them as separate documents. For document uploads, it can be helpful to include a quick note summarizing the correspondence to avoid having to scroll through multiple pages.



03 Physical Documents

As covered in more depth in the chapter on safeguarding constituent information, it is important to develop a safe and reliable method for handling physical documents from constituents that puts them into the CMS as quickly as possible.



CASEWORK **BASICS**

Caseworkers often report frustration with finding basic resources on setting up and running a standout casework operation. Our free Casework Basics program fills in the gaps between existing casework resources and on-the-ground wisdom, and serves as a central clearing point for internal and external information on casework.

01 DEFINITION &
RULES

04 AGENCY
CORRESPONDENCE

02 STRUCTURING A CASEWORK
OPERATION

05 CLOSING
CASES

03 CASEWORK
INTAKE

06 SAFEGUARDING
CONSTITUENT INFO

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