

MU Extension Guidelines on Testifying Before a Legislative Committee or Commission

On occasion, University of Missouri Extension faculty members are asked by members of the Legislature to testify before a legislative committee or commission. This invitation usually is the result of recognition on the legislators' part that the faculty member has particular expertise in an issue that is being discussed or considered for legislation. If you are asked to testify before a committee or commission, first discuss the opportunity with the appropriate program director(s) to determine if testifying fits within your current non-biased, research-based, educational role as a faculty member of MU Extension. Your program director may choose to be in the room with you to answer broad-based questions about MU Extension programs or budgets. Also, let MU Extension's liaison in the UM System Government Relations Office — Marty Oetting — know of any testimony or presentations planned so that he can provide on-site assistance and details about the committee or the members that may help in the presentation or follow-up.

Following are guidelines for testifying before a legislative committee or commission.

Legislative committees — Usually testimony involves a bill or resolution. In nearly all cases, University of Missouri Extension witnesses will opt to address the committee after those in favor of the bill and those opposed have had a chance to talk. The chair of the committee will call for those in favor first and those in opposition second. The chair will then ask if anyone wishes to testify "for information purposes only." Since MU Extension's role is education, this is usually the appropriate category. All witnesses are asked to complete a "witness information form" in which you are asked to provide your contact information.

In nearly all cases, you will have been in contact with the sponsor, but if not, an effort should be made before the hearing to do so. The rule of thumb for length of testimony is two to four minutes. Try to make your main points within that timeframe, and prepare written testimony to leave with the chair for distribution to the committee later if there is important additional information available.

During a legislative hearing, there are normally time constraints, but members of the committee will often ask questions. If you know a member of the committee, and there is an important point to be made, visit with that individual shortly before the hearing and suggest that they ask a question during your testimony.

While the process can be intimidating, it is best just to relax and make your presentation as with any other professional interaction. Aggressive questioning by committee members is highly unusual except in cases of especially controversial legislation.

Commissions — Nearly all of the suggestions for testifying before committees apply, but there is one important difference. Normally a presentation to a commission involves commission members who have been appointed because of their special backgrounds. Some will have served for some time or have a great deal of knowledge about the subject matter. Take more time and go a little deeper into the substance of the issue before a commission than you would before a legislative committee.

Present a professional appearance — Appropriate dress in testifying before a committee or commission is business attire. Wear your MU Extension nametag. Using PowerPoint or other means of electronic presentation may be appropriate if you are accorded enough time to make it worthwhile and if you are in a hearing room that lends itself well to the committee seeing the screen.

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