

## Tips for testifying on Capitol Hill

Congratulations, you have been asked to provide testimony before a Congressional committee! This is an excellent opportunity to share your expertise with policymakers and the public. Here are a few tips to get you started.

### Before you say yes.

- **Understand the goals for the hearing.** Discuss the purpose of the hearing with the committee staff so you can be sure your expertise aligns with their needs and that you are comfortable with the expected themes.
- **Ask about the other witnesses.** The choice of panelists may influence your decision whether to participate.
- **Determine the timeline.** Written testimony is often due in advance of the hearing date and may require a specific format. Make sure you can accommodate the committee's schedule.

### Preparing for the hearing.

- **Alert BU Federal Relations that you will be testifying.** We can review your written and oral testimony, provide background materials on the lawmakers who will be present, and schedule additional meetings for you in Washington, D.C.
- **Review the background of the committee members.** BU Federal Relations can help you understand the legislators' positions on the hearing topic so you can prepare testimony relevant to their interests and anticipate the questions they will pose.
- **Prepare both written and oral testimony, which generally should not be identical.**
  - *Written testimony:* This is your comprehensive response to the theme of the hearing, abiding by any length or formatting guidelines provided by the committee. It will be distributed to members of the committee in advance and posted for the public on the committee's web site.
    - Use sub-headlines and numbering to break up the document and make it easy to read. Lawmakers and their staff have a lot of material to review prior to a hearing; your ideas will stand out if you make your document a pleasure to read.
    - Remember to use lay language, as the readers will not have your scholarly expertise.
    - Embedded graphs, charts, and photos can be impactful, but check with the committee staff as to whether they can be used in written testimony.

- *Oral testimony*: This should be an abbreviated, punchy version of your written testimony that includes a few attention-grabbing hooks. Witnesses are typically given five minutes to deliver their oral testimony.
  - Begin by thanking the hearing organizers for inviting you to testify (i.e., “Thank you Chairwoman Smith and Ranking Member Rodriguez for the opportunity to address the Committee today.”).
  - Use guiding words that make it easy for lawmakers to follow your testimony (i.e., “I am going to talk about three concepts today, the first is…”).
  - Start with an anecdote or striking statistic to grab the committee’s attention
  - Try to convey no more than three or four main ideas and use memorable, concrete examples that reinforce those points.
  - Practice your oral testimony to make sure you can deliver it at a conversational speed, with pauses for eye contact, in less than five minutes. The committee chair will ask you to stop speaking if you exceed the time limit. A general rule of thumb is that people speak between 125 and 150 words per minute.

**During the hearing.**

- **Arrive early.** Familiarize yourself with the microphones and introduce yourself to your fellow panelists.
- **Know the room.**
  - *Microphone.* You will need to manually turn your microphone on and off each time you use it.
  - *Lights.* A green light means you have five minutes to speak, yellow means you have one minute left, and red means you need to conclude.
  - *Dais.* As you face the dais, the committee Majority will be on your right and the Minority will be on your left. Each Member of Congress will have a nameplate that identifies them.
- **Be polite.** When answering questions, it is customary to thank the questioner before responding (i.e., “Thank you, Congresswoman Jones, for your question.”).
- **Stay focused.** Keep your answers brief and keep returning to the main points you want to convey.
- **Chime in.** If you would like to answer a question that is posed to another witness or to dispute something said by someone else, you can politely interject (i.e., “If I may, I have some data on that question I would like to share.”) Keep your response focused on data and evidence to de-personalize disagreements.

- **Stick with what you know.** If you do not know the answer to a question, it is appropriate to say that you do not have data on that issue. If you would like, you can offer to follow up after the hearing once you have done more research.
- **Say goodbye.** At the conclusion of a hearing, lawmakers often come down from the dais to greet the witnesses. This is an opportunity to provide your business card and offer to stay in touch.

**After the hearing.**

- **Say thank you.** Send the committee staff a thank you email expressing your appreciation for the opportunity to testify.
- **Respond to Questions for the Record.** The committee staff will send you QFR's, questions that Members of Congress did not get a chance to ask during the hearing. Witnesses are typically given a brief period to respond in writing, and the responses are part of the hearing record.
- **Follow up.** You can be in touch with a Congressional office directly if there is a point you would like to clarify or new research you would like to share. BU Federal Relations can help you identify the appropriate contact.