

How to make connections



4 tips to connect with the Society, local officials, media and business owners and make an impact now.

by Matt Alderton

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[Building connections with friends](#), neighbors and lawmakers is a powerful way to positively affect people’s lives.

“Many people are nervous about getting involved in advocacy because they think they have to know politicians, or be savvy about the political process,” says Karen Mariner, vice president of State and Local Government at the National MS Society. “The truth is, you just have to be willing to share your MS story, which everyone can do. That alone raises awareness about MS and about the MS community’s needs.”

1. Connect with the Society.

“Each chapter has a staff person with advocacy responsibilities. Contact that person and tell him or her that you want to attend a legislative meeting,” advises Mariner, who says the Society regularly hosts meetings with local, state and federal lawmakers. “When we bring a constituent who’s living with MS to a meeting, it adds a personal face to the disease, and legislators remember that.” If you have existing relationships with decision-makers, such as legislators, speak up. Those relationships could help drive even more change.

2. Connect with elected officials.

It’s not as difficult as many people think to get to know politicians. “Many legislators host

town hall meetings and community resource fairs,” and connecting with their staff members—who often are present at meetings—can be just as fruitful as connecting with the officials themselves, explains Mariner. “Many legislators send e-newsletters; that’s how to get information about community meetings.” Many also offer opportunities to connect via social media.

3. Connect with local media.

Most communities have a local newspaper and may have other publications, including magazines, mailers, newsletters and blogs. Submitting a letter to the editor is a great way to raise awareness by connecting with fellow citizens. “Let’s say there’s a new supermarket being built and they didn’t put in the appropriate number of curb cuts,” Mariner says. “Writing a letter to the editor is effective because you’re not the only one who needs those curb cuts.”

4. Connect with business owners.

In the above example, approaching the manager of the supermarket might be a good idea, not only because he or she is in a position to install more curb cuts, but the manager also may have relationships with local, state or even federal lawmakers. “When you build relationships with local business leaders, those local business leaders in turn can help you develop a relationship with elected officials,” Mariner says.

Whomever you connect with, and however you do it, the best results come from turning a single meeting into an ongoing relationship. To do that, Mariner says, be sure to get contact information. After your initial contact, stay in touch. Send them a news article on the latest MS research, for instance, or invite them to a meeting of your local MS support group—anything to keep living with MS top of mind. “Every voice counts,” Mariner says. “If you raise your voice, it’s going to inspire someone else to raise theirs. And if each one of us shares our story and raises our voice and gets involved, collectively we can create a chorus of activists and amplify our impact.”

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based freelance writer and editor.

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