

Tips for Writing Letters to the Editor on Public Pensions

Letters to the Editor (LTEs) can be an effective means of communicating your message to a wider public audience. They can help you build your case for protecting or enhancing the retirement security of your members and their defined benefit pension system. They can also help you set the record straight on the significant amount of misinformation that exists in the public's mind about teacher pensions or to correct misinformed reporting. Letters to the Editor are one of the most widely-read sections of the newspaper, and an effective LTE can help you and your organization achieve your strategic goals.

BEFORE WRITING

- **DO** determine if an LTE fits into your overall strategy to defend teachers and the retirement security they've earned after a lifetime of hard work. *Does your potential letter serve a greater purpose or is it a one-off?*
- When you've decided to move forward with an LTE, **DO** outline your most compelling arguments and supporting facts first, and then write your letter. *With limited space available, it's best to have a main point with several supporting facts than to try to be all things to all people.*
- **DO** keep your letter to one issue at a time.
- **DO** have a specific target or audience in mind for your LTE. *Who are you trying to influence? From a Direct Action Organizing perspective, who has the power to give you what you want?*
- **DO** keep in mind the newspaper's word limit for an LTE and plan and write accordingly. *You can usually find their guidelines on their website, and publications typically ask for a maximum of 200 words for a letter to the editor.*

WHEN WRITING

- If responding to a previous article or letter to the editor, **DO** reference the title and/or publication date of that article/letter.
- **DO** include your name, contact information and any appropriate organizational title.
- **DO** state your main point or most compelling argument early in the letter and then build your case from there. *Then even readers who only glance at your letter will still get your main point.*
- **DO** mention your power by highlighting how many members you have and/or how many teachers, both active and retired, live in your state. *If your target is an elected official, these numbers will serve to show your clout in the community and the votes you can bring to bear.*
- **DO** refute opposing arguments with facts. *However, **DON'T** allow yourself to be led too far astray in your LTE – always pivot back to your core message. Similarly, **DON'T** speculate or get drawn into hypotheticals.*
- **DO** include a call to action, if appropriate, for individuals to call their elected representatives to express your preferred viewpoint.
- **DO** check your facts. *Nothing can undermine your message and even your organization like an incorrect or overstated claim.*
- **DO** write in simple, concise, and easy to understand language.
- **DO** cite and hyperlink to any credible research that supports your views.

- **DO** reach out to us! *NRTA is here to help and we're happy to be a resource for you on all of your advocacy-related endeavors!*

PERSONALIZING YOUR LTE

- **DO** humanize the subject of public pensions by telling personal stories about the individuals who earned them and who rely on these benefits. *Opponents of public pensions will likely make their case based on budgets, numbers and fear. It is therefore important that we humanize our arguments and make this discussion about real people who have worked hard, paid into the system and earned their keep.*
- **DO** focus on the earned nature of these benefits and relate it to something readers understand, like paying into Social Security or even a 401(k). *Teachers have been contributing to their pension each and every paycheck and have earned their benefits. This can be contrasted with a state's lack of payments to the pension fund if applicable.*
- **DO** talk about the dedication of teachers who spent their whole careers serving others and their communities, often taking money out of their own pockets to help their students learn.
- **DO** try to expand your arguments beyond teachers to how public pensions help the economy and taxpayers. *The AARP/NRTA/NIRS State Facts sheets, as well as NIRS' Pensionomics 2014 report, are wonderful resources that can help you show the positive impact that public pension benefits have on state and local economies, job creation, tax revenues, and in preventing costs associated with employee turnover.*
- **DO** acknowledge shortfalls in pension funding, but **DO** also put those shortfalls into context. *For example, how long can the pension pay 100% of promised benefits / over how many years can the shortfall be made up, or how much is the shortfall as a percentage of the state's budget? In addition, what has already been done to fix the shortfall?*
- If you are writing about a plan to move new hires from the current defined benefit system into a 401(k)-type program, **DO** talk about the transition costs of moving to such a new system. *Running two systems is more expensive than running one, while doing nothing to pay down and financial shortfalls in the first system. As a matter of fact, freezing the pension system to new hires makes existing shortfalls even worse.*
- **DO** talk about the fact that all hard-working Americans should have a secure retirement and that there is broad public support for the financial security afforded by pensions.

WHEN SEEKING TO BE PUBLISHED

- **DO** follow the guidelines set out by the publication for submitting letters to the editor. *In many cases, a newspaper's website will detail these requirements and typically require a letter that is 200 words or less.*
- **DO** submit your letter electronically (email) if possible.
- **DON'T** send email attachments; instead include the text of your letter in the body of the email messages.
- **DO** follow up with the newspaper to find out if they plan to publish your letter.
- **DO** expect modifications to your letter for brevity and clarity. *Be as flexible as possible with the changes, but at the same time **DON'T** accept changes that you believe change the meaning of your letter.*