

Navigating the Bureaucracy

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Bureaucracy. We all know what the word means, and we all cringe when we hear it. We imagine hours and miles of red tape, enough to drive you nuts. It feels like you're adrift, and no one cares. Well, it doesn't have to be that way. There are a few tricks to navigating those waters a bit more quickly, and with better results.

When you have a problem with a government agency, it helps to remember that there is someone in charge of everything, and they all have phones. Before you call, define for yourself the problem you want to solve, and what solution you want. In most cities, government listings appear in the *blue pages* of the regular telephone directory. Browse through the government listings in the phone book to find the right agency. Review the agency's listings to find an office with a title similar to your problem. Call that office and explain the situation *briefly* to the receptionist. S/he usually does not have the authority to solve your problem, but probably knows who does.

Don't let them tell you that there is no one else to help you. The highest-ranking person in the building does not answer the phone. Ask her/him to direct you to the proper person. If you still can't find the right office, look at www.usa.gov. That Web site has information on every department of every level of government. You'll be sure to find something to point you in the right direction. Don't forget to try your mayor, governor, or other local officials, too.

Keep notes. Record the name and title of everyone to whom you speak, as well as the date and time of your conversation. If they make a promise, get the details and a deadline. Follow up with a letter to that person, confirming your conversation, and the promises. Things move faster if you can fax the letters. Keep copies of *all* paperwork.

If this doesn't work, go higher up the food chain. Get the name and title of the head of the department, or the branch of government. Send a letter to that person with a brief description of your problem, your efforts to solve it, and the results – or lack thereof. Ask them to instruct the proper person to look into the situation. This method usually works. The President, CEO, Director, or whomever, will probably not respond to your letter personally but it will reach someone with enough power to solve the problem. It is much easier to move downhill rather than try to fight your way uphill.

If you still can't get anywhere, contact a legislator – your city council member, state legislator, representative in Congress, or Senator. You can also call the media. Public agencies and large corporations don't want negative publicity. There are private nonprofit agencies to advocate on behalf of the public interest in many issues. They're also listed in the phone book blue pages.

If you're looking for information and can't get it, submit a request under the appropriate open-records law. All federal government offices – yes, *all* of them – are required to give information to the public under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Each agency has designated a particular office to handle FOIA requests. The usa.gov Web site contains the name and address of the proper office for each department or agency. The Pennsylvania Right to Know Law (RTKL) covers state and local government offices and school districts. Those names and addresses are also on usa.gov. If you don't have Internet service, you can get the information over the phone.

Once you have the address, simply write a letter, addressed to the person in charge, stating that you are requesting information under the US Freedom of Information Act or the Right to Know Law. Then they *have* to give it to you. They can only refuse requests under certain limited circumstances. Agencies can charge fees for extensive research time and photocopying, but if your request is reasonable, they usually waive the fee.

At some point, you will probably run across someone who will be sensible and helpful. When you find that person, let them know you appreciate them. Everyone welcomes a thank you note and a letter of praise to his or her boss.

Good luck!

For more information on FOIA/RTKL, or to find names and addresses:

www.usa.gov

or

1-800-FED-INFO

1-800-333-4636

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