Appearing Before Committees

At some point in his or her career, a seismic safety advocate may be invited to appear before legislative or advisory committees that have roles in shaping seismic safety policies. These bodies may include school boards, municipal councils, state legislatures, Congressional committees, advisory committees like city and county planning commissions, or code committees. The suggestions below will help make the experience comfortable and productive.

Do Your Homework about the Committee and the Purpose of the Meeting
Before scheduling meetings with committee staff or agreeing to testify, establish the relevance of the committee to the issues that you want to address. Be clear about the purpose of the hearing you will be attending and your testimony’s fit with that purpose. It makes little sense to appear before a committee that is neither the correct forum for the topic nor concerned with the specific issues you are going to raise.

Be Clear about What You Are Advocating
In crafting suggestions to the committee, be clear about your facts, the problem, and the solutions you wish to advocate. Focus on two or three key points to get across. A sea of facts about a problem or heart-wrenching stories about harms do little to help a committee understand what you want them to do to address the problem.

Prepare a Simple and Direct Message
Committee members are not likely to be experts on seismic safety so your testimony should educate committee members in an informative manner. Detailed or technical points can be submitted in written testimony for the record or as background materials for interested staff and committee members. Only a short time is available for testimony, so fill it only with critical information.

Establish Your Credentials
Introduction to written and oral testimony should clearly establish who you are and, most importantly, whom you represent. Establish the type of expertise you have and the breadth and depth of the group that you represent. The logic for this is that elected officials, in particular, respond to groups rather than to individuals. It is important to mention that the group you represent endorses your comments.

Convey Credibility through Delivery
Present your information in a convincing manner. Use charts that display relevant information (as handouts or displays). List sources for your information. Acknowledge counter claims and point out why they are not accurate. Maintaining eye contact with committee members is an important way of subtly establishing credibility.
Anticipate the Environment for the Hearing
Many who testify are tripped up by not having the proper equipment available, not realizing that the committee is running behind (or ahead), not being able to adjust testimony to a shortened timeframe, being thrown off by other testimony, and not being prepared for any media that might be present. Anticipate potential hiccups by checking ahead on arrangements, knowing who else is involved and the format for the session, being prepared for all media personnel, and being ready to adjust the length of your testimony.

Practice Your Remarks and Responses to Questions
Practice to gain comfort with the material you are presenting. A rehearsal will allow you to assess how clearly you can communicate with your audience. It helps if the practice sessions are in front of some individuals familiar with the perspectives of the actual committee audience. An important part of such practice sessions is anticipating questions that may come up.

Be Prepared for Questions
Not all questions can be anticipated, but many can and should be. As with the testimony itself, responses to questions should be succinct, accurate, and credible. Resist the temptation to guess if you do not know the answer. It is better to respond that you will find out the answer and respond later in writing. Saying “I don’t know” is acceptable as long as it is not the only response you can offer to each question.

Follow up
As committee procedures allow, edit your comments for the record to correct any mistakes in your own or others’ testimony. Promptly send in written responses to questions you could not answer at the time. The written record of any testimony is often more important than the testimony itself. It has a longer shelf life and reaches many more people.

Work with Staff
Committee staff members are more than gatekeepers; they are also information conduits and repositories of knowledge for committees. It is as important as the testimony itself to help them by making written materials available in advance, providing timely follow up to questions, and responding to their concerns. A good relationship with the staff can result in repeated invitations to appear before committees.