

Tips for Meeting with Elected Officials

Plan your meeting

- Meet in your home district. Meetings in the home district are often less hurried than meetings at the Capitol, and they provide the “home turf” advantage. Find out when your legislator is in his or her home district and schedule your appointment then.
- Even better – invite them to your organization! If your workplace illustrates your issue or position, invite them to visit you. They’re much more likely to remember you and your story if they see where you work.
- Plan your meeting. Decide whether you are going alone or with a group of constituents. If you go as a group, decide who is going to lead the meeting and what each person is going to contribute to the discussion. This will help eliminate awkward silence or repetitive messages and will ensure that you hit all the key points you want to cover. You will likely have only 15-20 minutes for your meeting, so plan accordingly.
- Media coverage. If you want press coverage of your meeting, clear it beforehand with the member. Don't “ambush” the Member with surprise or unexpected press or by taping the meeting without permission.

Requesting your meeting

- Make your request in writing or with a phone call to the scheduler.
- Suggest specific times and dates for your meeting and let them know how many people will participate.
- Let them know what issue or legislation you wish to discuss.
- Be flexible. If the legislator cannot meet with you, or cancels the meeting, ask to meet with his or her staff.

Prepare for the meeting

- Decide in advance what you hope to get out of the meeting – an agreement to sponsor a particular bill, or educating the member on your program or issue for example.
- Limit your visit to one, or at most two, topics.
- Do your homework. Do a little research about your elected official: look up their biographical information, resume, congressional committee assignments, previous position on your issue, etc.
- Know and understand opposing arguments and be prepared to discuss them.
- Back up your side with facts, not morally or emotionally charged arguments. Never make up information or exaggerate – let the powerful truth speak for itself.
- Prepare a concise one-page fact sheet to leave behind. The fact sheet should be simple and to the point. You can include any of the following suggestions: Descriptions of the problems you want solved and specifically what actions you want the elected official to take to solve them ,
- Bring information about your organization, local press clippings, photographs and easy to understand charts and graphs that make your point. If you have been unable to get your Member to visit your agency, prepare a scrapbook or photo album that captures the services you provide. Pictures of happy children and families consuming nutritious foods usually do the trick! Don't be surprised if it lands on his or her coffee table.

Over—→



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During the meeting

- Start the meeting by thanking the legislator or staff person for his or her time.
- Present your case clearly and succinctly.
- Give examples of the impact the proposed legislation will have on your home district or community.
- State only what you know. Don't overstate your case, fudge the facts, or guess. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't make it up. Offer to find out and send information back to the office later.
- Keep control of the time. You'll likely have twenty minutes or less with a staff person, and as little as ten minutes if you meet with your elected official.
- Make clear what you want your legislator to do and why. If you don't ask your elected official for action, don't expect to see any.
- Give the member or staff your previously prepared "leave behind."
- If you have the opportunity, personally invite the member and his or her staff on an informal tour of your organization.

Afterwards

- Always follow up your visit with a thank you note.
- Answer any questions you couldn't answer in the meeting and provide any other information requested.
- Add your Member to your mailing lists for newsletters, invitations to local events, etc.
- Visit more than once. Over time, visit with your legislator to continue to discuss issues and make requests as you have them. Be sure to be a reliable source of information for them on your issue by delivering what you promise, avoiding overstatement, and communicating clearly.

Don't be surprised if...

- The person you meet with is very, very young.
- You have to walk to meet the member of Congress.
- You meet only with staff.
- You meet in the hall.

Thank you to the Food Bank of Central New York for this resource.

