Personal Visits with a Legislator

Legislators Want to Hear From You

The first time you meet your legislator face to face, you may be nervous. Keep in mind, however, that Legislators and their staff people repeatedly say that the information nonprofits provide is important to their decisions, so don’t feel that you are entering the legislator’s office as a supplicant.

Remember:
- Legislators are almost always very eager to win your support.
- Legislators want to put their best foot forward with their constituents.
- Legislators are sincerely interested in getting their constituents’ views on legislation.
- You are the expert on your issue — you have information that the legislator needs.

Reasons to Meet With Your Legislator

There may be many reasons why your group may want to meet with a legislator who is taking a leadership role on your bill.

Among these:
- To thank the legislator for taking the lead on your bill
- To seek advice on how your organization can be most helpful in developing support for your legislation.

Remember that you will think of the bill you are supporting as your legislation, but the legislator will naturally consider it to be his or her bill and will have a number of ideas and suggestions to help you focus your efforts.

Scheduling the Meeting With Your Legislator

If you have decided to meet with your legislator, there are ways to help the meeting run smoothly.

Remember:
- It is important to make an appointment not just drop in on the legislator.
- It is better to telephone than to write for the appointment, because calling makes it easier to find an acceptable date.
- It is more difficult for the appointments secretary to turn you down by telephone than by letter.
- It is always more effective if you as a constituent ask for an appointment, rather than having your organization’s staff make that contact.

If you don’t have an appointment and the legislator is on the floor of the House or the Senate, as a last resort — and only if it is critically important — send in a note by House or Senate page, asking that the legislator come out to speak with you. Use this approach only if you know the legislator well enough to be confident that the interruption won’t hurt your cause more than help it.

Meeting With a Staffer

Legislators almost always do try to meet with their constituents. Don’t turn down the opportunity to meet with a staffer, however, if it develops that the legislator cannot meet your schedule.

It is always more effective if you as a constituent ask for an appointment, rather than having your organization’s staff make that contact.
In Congress, and in many state legislatures:
• Senior staff people wield considerable power.
• Senior staff people often are able to give more time and attention to issues than legislators can.
• Meetings in a district office, meetings there can be particularly productive because legislators usually are less harried when they are home on weekends or during recesses.

**During the Meeting**

It is acceptable to assemble a delegation for the meeting but remember that small meetings will allow for more detailed discussion of an issue, including frank comments from the legislator about the dilemma he or she faces in making choices on the issue.

**Remember:**
• One delegate should be designated as the principal spokesperson.
• The group should meet at least briefly in advance, to orchestrate the visit.
• Be certain that there is agreement on the objectives to be accomplished in the meeting and on the points to be stressed.

Having more than one person presenting information permits a person who is not talking to the legislator to be ready to step in with the next key point, but don't overpower your legislator.

**Presenting Your Position**

You will probably know considerably more about your subject than your legislator does, so there is no reason to feel abashed. Legislators will welcome information and will particularly appreciate any anecdotes or illustrations that spell out what the impact will be on people in their legislative districts.

**Remember:**
• Present your views with conviction, but don't put him or her on the defensive.
• It helps to cover your issue from the legislator's perspective, tying it in with his or her past votes or interests.
• Listen attentively.
• The legislator's opening discussion with you will often give you clues about how to connect your issue with his or her concerns.
• Don't bluff -- If you don't have the answer to a legislator's question, say so. Tell the legislator that you will provide the information, and then be certain that you do.
• Give responses to arguments that you know your opposition will raise, but don’t degrade your opponents.
• Provide information, both orally and in a fact sheet that you leave with the legislator.
• Includes a brief description of your issue in the fact sheet, why it is important to your organization, and the action that you want the legislator to take.
• Give a copy of the fact sheet to the legislative aide as well.

**After the Visit**

After the visit, write a letter of thanks to the legislator. Be sure to remind him or her of any agreements reached, and provide any information that you promised.

**Often, the legislator’s opening discussion with you will give you clues about how to connect your issue with his or her concerns.**