

Meeting with Legislators in the Capitol

A personal visit is the most effective means of communicating with a legislator because you have the ability to respond immediately to questions that may otherwise cause hesitation for support and it's more difficult for a legislator to ignore five advocates in person than it is to dismiss five form emails.

Meetings with a legislator have different purposes. If it's your first meeting, the focus should be on acquainting the legislator with your organization, your mission, and your primary policy concerns as well as building a relationship for future ongoing communication. Other meetings may be for a specific policy purpose, like sharing your position on a bill, discussing an upcoming vote, asking a lawmaker to introduce or co-sponsor legislation, or asking a legislator in a leadership position to move forward a priority bill.

(1) Plan Your Visit Carefully

Ask yourself what you want to achieve, which legislator or staff member you need to meet with to achieve your purpose, and who are the best people to convey your message. You may need to do some research on the legislator's background to get an idea of which individuals could bring more influence to the meeting. If your issues have been debated or voted on previously, try to find out how the legislator voted or if s/he has sponsored similar legislation before.

(2) Make an Appointment

Unless you lobby in the state capitol every day, call the legislator's office in advance to set up an appointment in the capitol or in the district. All legislators have secretaries that handle their schedules. When you request the meeting, give your name, the organization, the purpose of the meeting, and how many people will be attending.

Lawmakers' schedules get busier as session advances, so call at least a week (or more) in advance to make sure there is time available. Sometimes legislators' offices won't even schedule exact appointments, but will offer general times when the legislator is available to stop by.

At the state level, you can generally meet with the actual Senator or Representative as long as you try to schedule in advance and are persistent when you get to the capitol. When meeting with Senators or members in leadership positions, legislative staff often participate in the meeting as well.

(3) Be Prompt, Patient, & Persistent

When it is time for your scheduled appointment, be punctual and be patient. It is common to have to wait in a busy legislator's office to accommodate for constantly changing schedules. Be professional in this situation! You can either wait for awhile for the legislator to show up or ask the staff where you might be able to track down the legislator in the capitol. You may have to find the legislator yourself walking between committee hearings or you may ask the staff to pull the legislator out of debate to speak with you.

If the legislator absolutely does not have time to meet with you, ask to meet with his/her Chief of Staff and make sure that all constituents sign the legislator's office guest book.

(4) Practice Your Elevator Speech

If the only time you can get with a legislator is in the hall between meetings, then take the opportunity! These meetings may only last a minute, so practice your message and make sure you include your ask. One minute may be all the time you need to get an answer. Follow up with the legislator's office and leave any informational materials as well as your contact information in case the office has further questions.

(5) Introduce Yourself

When you finally meet with the legislator, briefly introduce yourself and your organization. If you provide any services in the legislator's district, talk about your role in the community and the number of constituents that you serve.

(6) Make Your Case

Reiterate why you wanted to meet with the legislator. If you are visiting on a specific bill, bring a copy of the bill to give to the legislator and provide an update on the status of the legislation. Explain why you support the bill and connect the issue to the lawmaker's own district and constituents. Whenever possible, use data and personal stories specific to the district.

If there are multiple people participating in the legislative visit, decide in advance who will say what so that you don't waste time repeating each other.

(7) Be Honest

If you don't know the answer to a question, don't make it up! Do not exaggerate data or other information during the meeting to help your case. Honesty is key to being an effective advocate. Let the legislator know that you will follow up with the information requested, then do!

(8) Make the Ask

Be clear on your ask to the legislator and don't be hesitant to push for a commitment. Do you want the legislator to vote yes or no on a particular bill? To co-sponsor legislation? Lawmakers likely won't let you know if you don't ask! If the legislator will support you, share your appreciation. Even though you disagree with an opponent, respect their stance and don't burn bridges. Today's opponent may be a supporter of a different children's issue next week. Many lawmakers will just avoid giving their position or making a commitment — in this case ask whether you can provide additional information to help them make a decision. Then be sure to follow up!

(9) Bring a Leave-Behind

Prepare a one-page informational sheet on your issue that you can leave with the legislator and bring along any other materials about your organization. Leave-behinds should be brief, concise, and informative without delving into policy specifics.

(10) Follow-Up & Thank You

No matter what the outcome of the meeting, thank the legislator for their time and the opportunity to visit. Write a follow-up thank you letter immediately and include any clarifications or additional information that you said you would provide.