

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

SECTION 5 SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS WITH LEGISLATORS

Phone calls and emails have their place, but nothing beats an old fashioned face-to-face meeting. In this section we will discuss how to set up effective meetings with your elected representatives. We have included tips for making and preparing for your appointments, conducting the meetings, and following up afterwards.

Before the Meeting

SCHEDULING

On the federal level you can meet with the staff of your Congress Members in Washington or at their home offices (most Members have multiple offices in their home districts). For a local meeting, call the district office closest to you (this is generally found on the Member's website) and ask to speak with the staff in charge of scheduling. They can tell you when the Member will be back in the district. Call well in advance if you would like to meet with the Member in person, but you are most likely to meet with a staff person. Staff members are key allies in your advocacy, so don't underestimate the potential of these relationships. Legislative assistants and other staff have a great deal of influence and will relay your message to their bosses.



You can meet at the district office but do not forget about a site visit. Look to Section Four for more details.

A dialogue with your elected representative is one of the most basic rights of our democracy. And while you bring neither meal tickets nor gifts, you nonetheless represent a constituency wielding a most valuable legislative commodity: votes. Remember that they work for you!

If you are going to be in Washington, D.C. and wish to schedule a meeting there, contact the D.C. office of your Senator or Representative about two weeks in advance and ask to speak with the scheduler. Introduce yourself, identify your place of employment, and make sure to point out that you live and/or work in the Congress Member's district. Explain that you are visiting Washington and that you would like to meet with the Member (if possible) or the legislative staff in charge of your issue of interest (e.g., health, housing, etc.). Some offices prefer that you email a meeting request, but the scheduler will let you know about specific office protocol. Follow up a couple days prior to your meeting just to confirm. **Expect your meeting to last only 15 minutes;** this leaves you time to schedule meetings with other representatives.

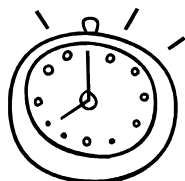


State and Local Level: State and local elected officials generally are far more accessible. Build relationships on the State level by meeting in the Capitol during your legislative session and inviting your representatives for a tour of your project when the legislature is out of session. Contact your state and local offices to set up such a meeting and use the protocol described above (your representatives can be found at www.ncsl.org/?tabid=17173.) Follow a similar process when working with officials at City Hall. City Council members are frequently accessible for more informal conversations at local community meetings.

Save Time Getting Around Capitol Hill



Take the subway, parking is very limited

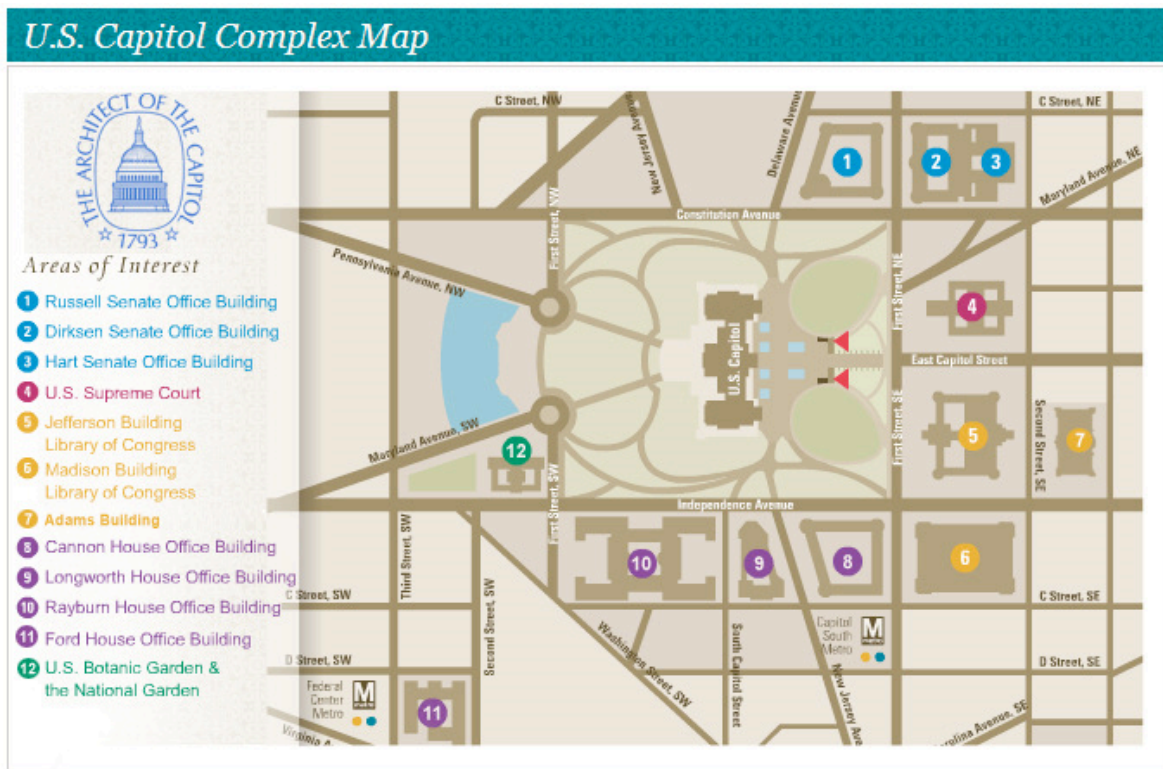


Plan extra time if you are meeting with both House and Senate offices (anticipate a hike from one side of Capitol Hill to the other)



Get lunch in the basement cafeterias

Figure 1. Map of Capitol Hill



A full page map is available at: http://www.aoc.gov/cc/cc_map.cfm

PREPARING

Get the most out of a 15-minute meeting by planning ahead and asking the following questions:

Who should attend with you?

Try to get a small but diverse group of constituents to attend the meeting with you (no more than five). This could include consumers, other staff members, board members, or representatives from other organizations. A broad 'coalition' lends legitimacy to your priority issues. Make sure to let the office know how many people are coming with you so they can plan for space.

What materials will you bring?

Always leave behind some written materials. Information about the work you do, your policy priorities, and information about the specific issue you plan to address help educate policy makers and refresh their memory later when they need the information. Use the National HCH Council website for resources, and add your own. Try to keep the packet small so they are not overwhelmed.



Where you are going?

Be on time even though your legislator may be late. Determine in advance where you are going and give yourself enough time to get there. Factor in enough time to get through security and to walk between the House and Senate office buildings.

What do you want the policy maker to do?

Officials will often expect some sort of request (known as an “ask”). Consider your “ask” and make sure that it is something your elected official has the power and ability to accomplish. Common “asks” include cosponsoring a bill, speaking with their leadership, signing a letter of support, or voting for or against a bill. Anticipate the potential concerns about your “ask” and prepare responses.

How will you frame your message?

There are many ways to say the same thing. Consider the communication style through which your legislator is most likely to hear your message. Do a little advance research on the philosophy and voting record of your legislator. Think about your word choices and how you will describe your issue in a way that appeals to the Member of Congress.

What will you say and who will say it?

Have a pre-meeting with your group to determine the central points to be made and who will address each theme or issue. This will help the meeting go smoothly and ensure all your issues are covered. You only have 15 minutes, so do not over-plan—three to four key points are sufficient, and your “ask” should be very clear. Leave some time for questions and discussion.

During the Meeting

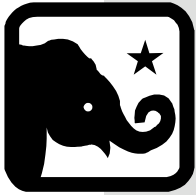
The standard legislative meeting lasts 15 minutes (maybe more on the state and local level) and should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Ensure sufficient time for the middle section of your meeting by keeping the introduction and conclusion brief.

INTRODUCTION

Introduce each person in the group and establish your connection to the Member and his/her district so they know you represent a large constituency. Familiarize your legislator with your organization, its services, and its role in the community. If applicable, thank the representative for any past support.

BODY

Do not linger on introduction and pleasantries for too long. You are at this meeting with a purpose. Allow time for each of the issues you wish to discuss and follow your planned agenda. Members and staff may try to keep the small talk going to avoid discussing issues of disagreement. Never be rude, but gently guide the discussion back to your agenda if it veers off course.



If your official has very different positions from you, appreciate this and acknowledge the difference of opinion. Understand their point of view and their concerns—and prepare responses ahead of time. Keep the conversation calm and respectful at all times.

CONCLUSION

Present your “ask” and request specific commitments from your legislator. This might include sponsoring a new bill, supporting or opposing existing legislation, speaking to leadership or caucus members about an issue, or taking some other action. Allow time for questions. If you do not know an answer, never fabricate one. Tell your legislator that you will follow up with their staff after the meeting.

Your responses during the meeting depend on the feedback you get from the staff or representative. The following suggestions can guide you:

Expresses support

- Determine the strength of their support
- Ask if they will take a leadership role or speak to their colleagues
- Ask if they can recommend others you can seek out for support

States they are unsure

- Determine the nature of their concern(s)
- Offer to provide more information addressing these concerns
- Establish a time to follow up and do not press them further

Expresses opposition

- Determine the strength of their opposition
- Politely address their concerns but do not expect to change their mind in one meeting
- Look for ways to maintain and further the relationship despite disagreement

Does not indicate their position:

- Do not assume you know their position based on party affiliation or other factors
- Attempt to clarify their position and offer to follow up
- Look for opportunities to further the relationship



After the Meeting

Always follow up after your meeting with a letter of thanks. Briefly summarize your issues and provide any additional information or answers to questions discussed during the meeting. The thank you letter is an effective relationship building tool and a great way to demonstrate your appreciation.

Now that you are a pro at legislative meetings, you'll be able to hone your advocacy skills with practice. There are many people in the policy world you can educate about the issues important to you and your clients. Make the most of your expertise by continuing to identify issues, raise awareness about solutions, and involve others in your advocacy. Policy change is just around the corner.

It is important to keep these suggestions in mind but do not make this into something bigger than it is. Keep it simple and remember the 'do's and don'ts' on the following page .

DO

relax

Remember that they work for you and that you have important information they need to do their job.

be polite

Social pleasantries are important. You want them to like you and think favorably about your organization.

be assertive

You have a purpose, so stick to your agenda.

look professional

Appearances matter. Most elected officials expect professional attire. Consumers should wear professional attire if possible, but do not allow attire to prevent their participation.

educate

Do not assume that the official or their staff knows about your issues. Even if your legislator does not support your position, you can still educate them.

tell the truth

Nothing will ruin a relationship with an elected official like providing false information. Do not exaggerate problems, and be honest if you do not know the answer to a question.

follow up

Ensure that you follow up with additional information if it is requested or you have offered it. It is a great way to show you are a resource to the office. Not following up can damage the relationship you've worked to create.

be appreciative

Thank your representatives for anything they have done for you in the past and always thank them for their time regardless of the outcome of the meeting.

have fun

The opportunity to speak to one's elected representatives should not be a burden. It is an opportunity to speak your mind and exercise democratic freedoms. Advocacy can be fun – enjoy yourself!

DON'T

be combative

Regardless of your opinion of a particular representative or their staff, remain polite. Make sure the conversation remains constructive and calm.

burn bridges

Today's opposition might be tomorrow's ally on this or another issue. Always remain respectful because you do not know how this official can help down the road. Education and awareness take time to build.

make comments about integrity

Despite sensational reports of corruption, the vast majority of officials are interested in the public good. Do not make any comment about money in politics and make sure such attitudes do not affect how you interact with the official. Negative comments will be remembered more than any positive points you made.

discuss political campaigns

Staff for elected officials are prohibited from discussing political campaigns. And nonprofits are prohibited from engaging in electoral activity.

be late

The official may be late, but you do not want them waiting for you.

be disorganized

Make sure to have all of your materials prepared. Turn off your phone, do not shuffle through your bag, and don't talk over one another during the meeting.

dismiss talking with an aide

Officials and their staff are very busy. They do not have much time for meetings or policy analysis. Legislative aides have tremendous influence in policy decisions and are very important to policy advocacy.



Next Steps

These strategies should have you well on your way to a successful meeting with your elected official. Good luck in your advocacy efforts and stay tuned for future advokit publications on administrative advocacy and working with the media!