

HOW TO: MEETING WITH MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Face to Face

Myth: *Most Senators and Congressmen won't meet with an unknown citizen.*

Fact: Members of Congress are impressed when citizens take time to make a personal visit. Citizens making that effort are more impressive than a herd of Washington lobbyists.

Myth: *Travel to Washington is a must to be listened to. Only paid lobbyists can afford the time or the expense – a luxury most citizens do not have.*

Fact: Travel to Washington is not necessary as there are other available opportunities. Members of Congress come home weekends. In addition, there are longer designated “work periods” during national holidays. Work days and Town Meetings are normally scheduled during the summer recess. These are held to solicit constituents’ views. Sometimes the member of Congress is seeking support for a project he wishes to sponsor. He may even ask for your help.

Myth: *Only experts are listened to.*

Fact: While it is important to know the substance of an issue (particularly when talking about local or state causes), constituents are not expected to know every fact or every detail of a national piece of legislation. Do your homework. Follow the scouting motto and *Be Prepared*. If the legislator has questions and you have no ready answer, it is OK to say, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out and get back to you” --- and be sure you do get back!

Obtaining an Appointment with Members of Congress

Call your legislator’s District or Washington office. Ask to speak with the appointment secretary or scheduler.

- Introduce yourself as a constituent living in _____ .
- Tell the scheduler you wish a meeting to discuss _____ .

Hint: A single topic is always best.

If an appointment is not possible during an upcoming recess, express your disappointment and immediately request an appointment for the next time the Congressional Member is at home. Telephone appointments are rarely satisfactory.

While it usually is best to meet directly with your legislator, if he or she is unavailable, ask for a scheduled appointment with the legislative staff member that is working with your issue. Legislative aides are usually well informed and as time permits, most helpful.

Hint: A letter confirming your appointment is an excellent follow-up. Include your name, address, phone number, e-mail address and subject to be discussed.

Hint: Ask one or two interested individuals to go along. They can take notes, listen and should be prepared to be a vital part of the discussion.

Hint: Doors fly open when at least one person in the visiting delegation is a constituent from their State or Congressional District. This interest and participation makes an immediate and important impression.

Prior to the Meeting

+ **Prepare appropriate fact sheets or other materials to leave with the lawmaker. Place these items in a folder identified with the discussion topic and the date. Add a business card, or prepare an index card containing your name, title, organization, email address and phone number. This information is important for future contacts. Remember that our lawmakers do not have time to wade through a ton of information.**

Be brief. Be concise. Be accurate.

+ **Establish your message. What do you wish to convey? Is there something you would like the legislator to do? Put your thoughts together ahead of time – write notes.**

+ **Learn something about the person you are meeting with. (i.e. hobbies, committees they serve on, information discovered on their web site) Talk with staff in a district office.**

During the Meeting

+ **Be prompt. Members' schedules are tightly packed. It is important to be on time.**

+ **Be flexible. If interruptions occur during your meeting, be patient.**

+ **Dress professionally. Don't let your appearance detract from your message or impair your credibility.**

+ **When appropriate begin with a compliment. Thank the member for his or her time. Express your appreciation for the favorable position he or she recently took on an issue you cared about.**

+ **Concisely state what issue you want to discuss, what your position is and what action you would like the member to take.**

+ **Tell how the issue affects the member's district and state (if relevant). Make it personal. Discuss why you care. Be helpful and willing to share your experiences.**

+ **Be a good listener. After you make your pitch, allow the member to respond. Answer questions to the best of your ability. If you do not know the answer – admit it. Try to provide the requested information promptly in a follow-up letter.**

+ **Ask direct questions to which the legislator can respond yes or no.**

+ **Always thank the member for their time, even if he or she did not agree with you, your position, or agree to do what you asked. Wars were never won in one day.**

After the Meeting

+ **Write a thank you note.**

+ **Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper about the meeting, if meaningful.**

+ **Share information about the meeting with interested groups that work on the same issue.**

Tidbits for a Personal Touch Bring Ice Breakers: A plant or seeds of your state flower, or wildflower; flowers from your garden; the organization's calendar or publication; a written invitation to a garden club luncheon meeting or special club event like a dedication.

One legislator changed his position after a passionate presentation – and his favorite cake.

Thoughtful gestures are remembered – especially by that caring staff person that was so helpful.