

# 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 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, IN CONGRESS AND MANY STATE LEGISLATURES:

- 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 – to thank the legislator for taking the lead on your bill or to seek advice on how your organization can be most helpful in developing support for your legislation.

## REMEMBER:

- The legislator may have a number of ideas and suggestions to help you focus your efforts on a particular bill.
- Meeting with your legislator can help you gauge the support or opposition to your position.
- Meeting with your legislator and providing information allows you to become a resource to him or her. As a result, the legislator's staff may call on you for input in the crafting of legislation.



## SCHEDULING THE MEETING

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 since calling makes it easier to find an acceptable date.
- It is more difficult for the scheduler 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.

**Side note:** 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.

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### 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.

#### REMEMBER, IN CONGRESS AND MANY STATE LEGISLATURES:

- Senior staff wield considerable power.
- Senior staff often are able to give more time and attention to issues than legislators can.
- Meetings in a district office can be particularly productive because legislators usually are less harried when they are home on weekends or during recess.

### 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. This includes frank comments from the legislator about the dilemma he/she faces in making choices on the issue.

#### REMEMBER:

- Appoint one delegate as the principal spokesperson.
- The group should meet at least briefly in advance to prepare for the visit.
- Be certain that members of the group agree on the objectives for the meeting and on the points to be addressed.

### 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 view 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/her concerns.
- Don't bluff – If you don't have the answer to a legislator's question, say so. Tell the legislator 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.
- Include 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/her of any agreements reached, and provide any information that you promised.