

Guide for Communicating with Congressional Offices

Communicating with congressional offices about specific legislation, or direct advocacy, is an important and effective tool for grassroots organizations. Engaging directly with Members of Congress and their staffs gives advocates the opportunity to voice their opinions about specific issues to respective legislators, often affecting policy and legislation. Direct advocacy is distinct from grassroots advocacy. While the former involves communicating directly with a legislator about specific legislation, the latter is an effort to communicate with the public about specific legislation. There are many ways to make voices heard on Capitol Hill, such as personal visits, letter writing, phone calls, e-mail, and fax.

The first section of this guide provides tips for face-to-face congressional visits; the second focuses on other ways of communicating with congressional offices, such as letter-writing and phone calls.

I. Congressional Visits

Preparation:

- Research which specific legislators have a stake in the issues you care about. Since a legislator's constituents have the loudest voice, meeting with the Senators from your state and the Congressperson who represents your district is important. You may also want to meet with members of the committee in which the legislation was introduced if the bill has not yet passed through committee. To find a congressional directory, visit www.govtrack.us.
- E-mail a legislator's office two weeks in advance to inform them of your trip to Capitol Hill. A week before your group is scheduled to arrive, begin to call their offices to schedule official appointments.
- Legislators are very busy and cannot be available to meet at all times. If he/she is unavailable, ask to meet with his/her staffer who works on the issues in which you are interested.
- Researching legislators' voting record may also be helpful. Information obtained through research can give you a better idea of how to approach the issues during the meeting. (Govtrack.us also includes information on bills, as well as legislators and their voting records.)
- If you are attending the meeting with a group of people, it is important for your group to meet in advance of the meeting to make sure that all participants are on the same page and agree to pursue the same objectives while in the meeting.

During the meeting:

- If you are meeting the legislator with a group, the smaller the group the better, as a larger group may feel overwhelming. No matter the size of the group, it is ideal to assign roles among members. Roles may include spokesperson/moderator, timekeeper, and note taker.
- Begin the meeting with a thank you for the positive things that Congress has done concerning your issues.
- The legislator/staffer you are meeting with may not know much about the issues. Make sure to introduce yourselves, the organization/community you are representing, and the issue you are there to talk about briefly and concisely.
- Present your concerns simply and directly. Be brief, direct, courteous and positive. Present the background of the issue in simple terms, explain how the issue affects your communities, and recommend what you would like the legislator to do. A meeting may only last 15-20 minutes.
- Remember to stay calm in the meeting. While the legislator may not agree with what you are saying, it is important that you do not become confrontational.
- At the end of the meeting, ask how your organization can be useful to the legislator and his/her staff. It is important to remember that legislators are not informed about all issues and that your organization can fill that void.
- Leave something behind, such as a brochure or fact sheet, so that the legislator and his/her staff can easily remember your group and your issues.
- It is important to exchange business cards with the staff member you meet with in order to keep in contact, share information and form relationships.

Follow-up:

- It is important to follow-up with your legislator's office once you return home. Thank the legislator/staff for taking time to meet with you through a letter and an e-mail.
- Send additional information on your issue that can further sway the opinions of those you met.
- Keep up constant communication with the Congressional office you visited so that your organization is seen as a reliable source of information.
- Report back to your community and other members of your organization. Inform them of the outcomes of the meetings as well as your successes.

II. Other Forms of Communication

Letters:

- If you choose to write your legislator, remember to keep your message short and to the point. Also make sure that you clearly identify the issues on which you are advocating.

- Often hand-written letters from constituents get more attention.
- Make sure to emphasize issues and not the organization/community you are affiliated with.
- Keep in mind that due to security screenings, there may be a long delay in your letter actually arriving at the congressional office.

Phone Calls:

- When calling your legislator, be prepared to keep the call brief and focused on the issue you are concerned about.
- Even if you don't speak to the legislator, it is still important to speak with a member of his/her office. Ask for the staffer that is working on the legislation for which you are advocating.
- Keep in mind that the receptionist keeps count of calls received in favor or against an issue.

In any form of communication, legislators and their staffs take special consideration of personalized contact. Therefore, fax and e-mail, while read, may not be the best way to influence the opinion of your legislator.