

FACES & VOICES OF RECOVERY

Organizing a Meeting with Your Elected Officials

Meeting with a legislator can be a critical part of an overall campaign and it's an important way to build a relationship with your elected officials. Here are some guidelines:

1. **Take several people.** A diverse group—particularly people directly affected by a particular policy—always convey more power than one person. A group can also help advocates feel comfortable and overcome any fear advocates may feel when lobbying. But be sure to organize your presentation. And don't overwhelm and possibly alienate a policymaker by bringing too many people, unless of course that is part of your strategy.
2. **Make sure you're meeting the right person.** Ideally, talk directly to the legislator. If that's not possible, make sure you talk with the staff person assigned to your issue. Also make sure to touch base with the member's chief of staff or administrative assistant. This person often serves as the member's political eyes and ears by informing a legislator of issues that are especially sensitive in the district. In general, a representative's district staff is best used to get access to the member, or to solve local problems. Policy concerns should be taken directly to the DC staff. District staff can help by telling the Washington staff that your group is important enough to be listened to.
3. **Take the time to introduce yourself to the member.** Members of Congress and their staff may not know who your group is or who you represent. Describe your membership in the district, what you do and your accomplishments. Better yet, invite the member and staff to visit a project, or your office. This kind of relationship building pays off when you come back with a specific request. And it gives the legislator a sense of what the programs you support actually accomplish.
4. **Expect legislators themselves to meet with you.** With the possible exception of Senators from large states, you should be able to meet with members of Congress a couple of times a year. You can be sure they've made time for wealthy contributors and special interest lobbyists. If you get a "no" from the scheduler, be persistent—if they can't meet with you during this Congressional recess, what about the next one?
5. **Always come with *specific* requests.** Never ask them to support "programs for addiction and recovery" in general. Most will gladly promise to do that. Instead, ask them if they'll vote for a specific bill, sponsor a particular amendment, or send a "Dear Colleague" letter to other legislators to support your position. Ask for things that require your elected official to act in a specific, public way, which you can verify.
6. **Close the deal.** Never leave a meeting without commitments and deadlines.
7. **There are no permanent allies or enemies.** A member of Congress who is your worst nightmare on one issue may be your leading supporter on another. If the member

doesn't react the way you had hoped, thank them anyway and tell them you hope to work with them in the future.

Holding your Meeting Do's and Don'ts

Do

- Identify yourself and who you represent right away. Legislators meet hundreds of people and can't remember everyone they come across.
- Know the issue (s) and its status. Refer to the legislation by number if there's one available.
- Know your legislator. Having an idea of his or her position on the issue, past votes on similar legislation as well as legislative and personal interests can help you to tailor your arguments.
- Be brief. (*Legislators are very busy.*)
- Be specific and practical. Relate arguments to situations at home.
- Thank legislators.
- Keep the door open for further discussion, even if you don't agree at this time. There's a reason for the expression "Politics makes strange bedfellows."
- Talk with legislators even if their positions are opposite yours.
- Think of yourself as a consultant to your legislator. You have expertise and insights that help the legislators understand issues and pending bills.
- Be honest. Never lie. Acknowledge opposing arguments and any political liabilities.
- Ask the legislator for support.
- Leave behind a one-page fact sheet summarizing your position. Highlight important facts and arguments. Include your name, address and telephone number so you can be reached if there are questions.

Don't

- Back legislators into a corner.
- Overwhelm them with too much information or jargon.
- Get into lengthy arguments.
- Be afraid to say you don't know. Offer to find out and send the information back.
- Confront, threaten, pressure or beg.
- Expect legislators to be specialists. Their schedules and the number of bills and issues they track make them generalists.
- Give campaign contributions in their office – it's illegal. (*donating to a legislative campaign as a private citizen is perfectly acceptable at a fundraiser or you can simply mail one to their campaign office*)