

TIPS FOR MEETING WITH LEGISLATORS

A face-to-face meeting of individuals or a small group of individuals with an elected representative, or a key member of their staff, is the best way to teach them about your concerns and, ideally, influence their decisions. Don't feel you are imposing: after all, legislators meet with constituents daily. If you feel intimidated at first, remember that legislators depend on you for support just as you depend on them. What follows are a few steps to help ensure a successful meeting.

Step 1: Arranging the Visit

- Don't just drop in. Visits can be scheduled, preferably 2 to 3 weeks in advance, through the appointment/calendar secretary either at the local district office or the capitol office. Unless you have an unusual problem, don't ask to meet for more than half an hour. You will probably get 10 to 15 minutes.
- Explain the reason for the visit: Get Acquainted? Express Views? Seek Action? Identify who will be attending. You'll increase your chances of meeting face-to-face with the member by having a group meeting of constituents who represent different experiences and backgrounds. This broadens your base and influence.
- Depending on legislative developments, it may be necessary to meet with staff rather than the legislator. Since legislators rely heavily on their professional staff's opinion, this is also a very important meeting. Staff members are vital gatekeepers; they must be cultivated. They can provide you with access and, if they are sympathetic with your position, can become a trusted voice in the ear of the legislator. If your legislator decides to adopt one of your causes, it is the staff who will do much of the work.
- Confirm the visit by letter soon after arranging the appointment, and then again by phone the previous day.

Step 2: Preparing for the Visit

- If you're going as a group, agree on your goal and message before hand. Show a united front. Divisiveness is both irritating and confusing. Agree on one spokesperson in advance.
- DO YOUR HOMEWORK. Have well-reasoned facts and figures on your issue(s) ready, but do not be overwhelming. Be ready to answer questions and (when necessary) respond to counter-arguments made by your opponents. Don't be afraid to say you don't know, but will get back to the legislator with needed information.
- Be sure that all participants in the meeting know the extent of the legislator's district, his/her committee assignments, number of terms served, voting record, and/or position, on the issue(s). Know the lawmaking process and what legislative actions are required. Be pleasant even if you disagree. Alienating your legislator won't help.
- Prepare a "leave-behind" information packet for the legislator. Include information on where to contact you, fact sheets and stories about your issues, constituent letters, and any briefing materials deemed appropriate. If