

Tips on Meeting In-District with Your Elected Officials

You don't have to go all the way to Washington to make a difference. Sometimes the easiest way to meet with Members of Congress is when they are back in the district. In fact, in-district meetings are often just as effective as meetings in Washington.

What is an in-district lobby visit? Having an in-district lobby visit means that you meet with your elected official or his/her staff in the district office instead of going all the way to Washington, D.C. At this meeting you share what you think about a certain issue or bill, and to try to get him or her to take action on that issue.

Where can you meet? Every Member of Congress has one or more offices in their congressional district that they frequently visit. The staff at these offices report to the Member about what is happening in the home state and district.

Who do you meet with? A meeting with a staffer, such as the Member's district director, is often a good prelude to meeting with the actual Member. You can also take advantage of informal meeting opportunities – at town hall forums, fundraisers and other local events that you know the elected official plans to attend.

Requesting Your Meeting

- Make your request in writing and follow up with a call to the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler.
- Suggest specific times and dates for your meeting.
- Let them know what issue and legislation (by bill number, if you have one) you wish to discuss.
- Make sure they know that you are a constituent.

Prepare for Your Meeting

- Check the ACLU website (aclu.org) for materials. We probably have information to help you decide on your talking points, as well as materials that you can leave with your elected official.
- Decide who will attend the meeting. Bringing more than four or five people can be hard to manage. Keep it small, but bring people who represent different groups that have an interest in the legislation like doctors, veterans, religious leaders, school board members, etc.
- Agree on talking points. It's tough to make a strong case for your position when you are disagreeing in the meeting! If a point is causing tension in the group, leave it out.
- Plan out your meeting. People can get nervous in a meeting, and time is limited. Be sure that you lay out the meeting beforehand, including who will start the conversation.
- Decide what you want achieve. What is it you want your elected official to do -- vote for or against the bill? Make a commitment to introduce or co-sponsor legislation? Asking your legislator or his or her staff member to do something specific will help you know how successful your visit has been!

During the Meeting

- Be prompt and patient. Elected officials run on very tight schedules. Be sure to show up on time for your appointment, and be patient -- it is not uncommon for legislators to be late or to have your meeting interrupted by other business.
- Keep it short and focused! You will have 20 minutes or less with a staff person, and as little as 10 minutes if you meet with your elected official. Make the most of that brief time by sticking to your topic.
- Bring up any personal, professional or political connections to the elected official that you may have. Start the meeting by introducing yourselves and thanking the legislator for any votes he or she has made in support of your issues, and for taking the time to meet with you.

During the Meeting [cont'd]

- Stick to your talking points! Stay on topic, and back them up with no more than five pages of materials that you can leave with your elected official.
- Provide personal and local examples of the impact of the legislation. This is the most important thing you can do in a lobby visit.
- Saying "I don't know" can be a smart political move. You need not be an expert on the topic you are discussing. If you don't know the answer to a question, it is fine to tell your legislator that you will get that information for him or her. This gives you the chance to put your strongest arguments into their files, and allows you to contact them again about the issue. Never make up an answer to a question -- giving wrong or inaccurate information can seriously damage your credibility!
- Set deadlines for a response. Often, if an elected official hasn't taken a position on legislation, they will not commit to one in the middle of a meeting. If he or she has to think about it, or if you are meeting with a staff member, ask when you should check back in to find out what your legislator intends to do about your request. If you need to get information to your legislator, set a clear timeline for when this will happen. That way, you aren't left hanging indefinitely.

After the Meeting

- Right after the meeting, compare notes with everyone in your group to understand what the elected official committed to do and what follow up information you committed to send.
- Each person who took part in the meeting should promptly send a personal thank you letter to the Congress member.
- Follow up in a timely fashion with any requested materials and information.
- If the elected official or staff member doesn't meet the deadline for action you agreed to during the meeting, ask him or her to set another deadline. Be persistent and flexible!
- Hold your member accountable! Let the field department at the ACLU know what you learned during your meeting by sending an e-mail to field@dcaclu.org. Knowing what arguments your Congress member used, what issues are important to him or her, and what positions he or she took will help us make our national lobbying strategy more effective!

Good luck and have fun!



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