

Preparing for a Legislative Visit

Be Prepared

Know your legislator, his or her political party, committee assignments, the district, the voting record, and any known position or public statement on PSJ issues. A helpful website for locating this information is <http://thomas.loc.gov/>.

Know your material—be well prepared for your meeting with facts, figures, legislative and regulatory history, and backup materials in case you need them. This will demonstrate the seriousness of your purpose to the legislator or staff, and it will add to your confidence if you have compiled thorough and detailed information. Make your arguments persuasively but be aware of the pressures on legislators and their world of competing priorities.

Carefully choose the most important points and keep your presentation simple, within a time frame of 15 to 20 minutes. Resist the temptation to tell the legislator everything you know about the issues. Begin with the highest priority in case the legislator gets a call to the floor to vote or to a committee meeting unexpectedly and you can't finish the meeting. Be prepared with backup in case someone wants to know it all!

Practice your presentation before people who are unfamiliar with your issues. They may point out inconsistencies or lack of information that you may have overlooked.

Tell the legislator what you want and what to do about it. They are too busy to keep track of all pending legislation and regulatory issues. Don't make them guess.

If a legislator gets aggressive and puts you on the defensive about a point, be sure to stay calm. You might want to say, "This is an important issue – could I quickly run through the rest of these points and then come back to this so that we can discuss it more – we'd like to get your point of view." Generally, this will be agreeable to a legislator. If he or she insists on proceeding anyway, you may have to let your other points fit in later if there is still time left. Diplomacy is your best defense. It is important to be positive.

Personalize the presentation. Illustrate your points with local examples of how the expertise of trained and certified professionals has mattered in a specific, local example. Leave a personal story, if possible, because it will help the Member remember it, especially if it involves a constituent.

Practice Makes Perfect

Time your presentation, keeping in mind that there will probably be questions and probably won't go completely as planned. Have your backup points ready in case you get lucky and hit an easy schedule day where you suddenly find yourself with an extra 15 minutes or more.

Make sure your meeting participants understand and agree on the ground rules before you have the meeting with your legislative representative. You will need to choose a spokesperson who is in charge of the discussion, makes sure all the points are covered, and lead any runaway conversations back to the point. Although every member of the group may wish to be part of the presentation, this can lead to chaos. It is important to have one person in charge.

Don't get distracted—it's easy to chat about mutual acquaintances or your trip to Washington or the weather at home and find your time has suddenly disappeared. Try to keep introductory comments brief. If a legislator shows a real interest in one of your points, don't cut him or her off just to make it through your list.

Don't get discouraged if the legislator gets called away and you get assigned to a staff member instead. Staff often has considerable influence over which bill a Member decides to cosponsor, the writing of public statements, or the formulation of ideas for public policy positions. A staff member can be your ambassador too.

Rules to Follow

- Be on time. A legislator is busy. Generally, you have a 15-20 minute appointment, and if you miss your window, you will probably not be able to reschedule another appointment.
- Introduce yourself and identify your hometown. Wear nametags so that the person you are meeting with feels more familiar with you (and in case he or she forgets your name). It is often helpful to share news about specific recent developments or needs in the district/state.
- Dress comfortably. You may have to do a lot of walking in changeable weather conditions; but remember you are representing your organization and dress accordingly.
- Be careful not to convey negative attitudes about politics or politicians, even if you hold private doubts. Remember that most legislators and staff are hard working even though you may not agree with their point of view. Be sure to express appreciation for past support.

Leave Your Message

Leave an outline of your presentation with the legislator/staff. The person who met with you won't remember all of your presentation and may want to read over your list later or give you a call. If you leave your card, write the purpose of your visit on the back because in six months, they may not remember the exact reason for the discussion.

Feedback is Important

Write a follow-up letter after you return home with a personal memory about your meeting. Reattach the basic sheet that you left at the legislator's office.

Share experiences with other members after your visits have been completed so that you can learn from each other for the next time. This may help you and your group to understand a particular member or identify common questions and arguments that are effective.

Just Ask

You can't expect to accomplish your purpose by meeting once with your legislator. Remember, this is a marathon, not a sprint. Legislators like to meet the people they represent and to get to know their concerns. Just ask. Following is a list of suggestions for further action:

Write more than one letter. It has already been suggested that you write a thank-you letter after your visit. In addition, look for other opportunities to write a letter, such as, before your visit requesting an appointment, informing the legislator of a new and exciting development in your area, reminding him or her of PSJ's accomplishments, and, of course, during key legislative or agency actions.

Invite the legislator to visit your business and use this as an opportunity to get a photo with the local newspaper and to show the legislator what you do.

Meet with the legislator when he or she is in your hometown as well as when you visit the Capitol. Legislators frequently hold district "town hall meetings" on weekends. Take every opportunity to let the legislator know about PSJ issues.

Get to know the legislator's staff. Just stop in to say hello to district staff when you are in the area, even if you don't schedule an official meeting.

Sample Checklist

Know Your Legislator

Your familiarity with a legislator's interests, politics and positions on issues will lead to a more productive visit. Before the visit, try to know the following:

- Political Party
 - Republican
 - Democrat
 - Other
- Ideology
 - Conservative
 - Liberal
 - Moderate
- State or district represented
- Nature of district
 - Rural
 - Urban
 - Mixed
 - Business/labor
 - University
- How long has legislator served to date?
- Leadership positions/committee assignments
 - Committee Chair
 - Subcommittee Chair
 - Ways & Means Public Safety Subcommittee
 - Senate Judiciary
 - House Judiciary