



Advocacy Education Series: Meeting with Your Elected Officials

There are many ways to get in touch with your legislator and to build a relationship, but the most effective medium for educating elected officials on important issues is by setting up a meeting.

Where and When to Meet: The best time to meet with a legislator is when they are in their home district and are focused on constituent needs.

The amount of time a legislator spends in their district varies considerably. Some legislators will travel to their home district periodically throughout the week when able. Others may not.

While the best place to meet with your legislator is in their district office, there are times when it is appropriate to meet in your legislator's capital office. These meetings are generally tied to critical pending legislation. Regardless of the meeting location, the etiquette and process involved are the same.

Request a meeting: Contact the legislator's office and ask to schedule an appointment. Explain who you are and the nature of your desired meeting with the legislator. To ensure that you are meeting with your legislator at an optimal time, ask what days the legislator will be in a district office, and if the days devoted to constituent outreach are consistent. If you don't hear back from direct staff contacts, many legislators have meeting request forms on their official websites.

Prepare for the meeting: Prepare your talking points in advance. Always bring printed materials to leave behind summarizing the key points you addressed. Try to develop your talking points and data in a way that demonstrates how the policy you are discussing will affect the local community and residents. If you are planning to discuss a specific piece of legislation, make sure you let the legislator/staffer know beforehand which bill so they can be prepared and review the text.

During the meeting:

- **Practice legislative etiquette.** Be on time and let the receptionist know you've arrived. Be positive and non-confrontational. Establish yourself as a resource. Legislators deal with many issues, so don't expect them to have familiarity with details. In a team visit, work with your colleagues, allowing all to participate in the meeting. Because the legislator's time is limited, have a plan and budget your time. Designate a group leader to guide the meeting and make sure participants stay on message.
- **Be concise and clear.** Don't try to convince the legislator that you know everything about criminal justice in only one meeting. If you are requesting action,

communicate that up front and support your request with strong arguments and examples. Summarize the meeting and answer any questions.

- **Tell the truth and focus on your perspective.** Never undermine your credibility by giving incorrect information. Be honest if you don't know the answer to a question. If asked about the other side of your argument, answer the question as completely as you can, giving your particular perspective.
- **Never promise more than you can deliver.** If you say you are going to do something, like find an answer and get back in touch with the legislator, make sure you do it as soon as possible.
- **Listen closely.** It will help you have a better dialogue with your legislator and avoid misunderstanding any commitment the legislator may make to you. Don't hear only what you want to hear. For example, "*I want to be with you on this*" does not mean that they are actually with you on it, and "*I want to help you*" is not a commitment that they will actually help. If necessary, follow up with specific, focused questions to make sure you understand what the legislator means.
- **Frame the issue as it affects the legislator and be prepared to help the legislator solve any political problems.** Be sensitive to particular peculiarities of districts. For example, if you ask a legislator whose district is hard-hit by the opioid crisis to support drug decriminalization legislation, come prepared with resources on how decriminalization can reduce overdose fatalities and improve treatment outcomes. Your case will be stronger and more compelling if you acknowledge and account for district-specific challenges they may face.
- **Work with staff.** Never view staff as second resort. Legislators depend heavily on their staff. Get to know key staff people and their needs and work styles.
- **Be flexible.** Visits rarely go exactly as planned. Legislators may get delayed in a committee hearing or a roll call vote may occur in the middle of your meeting. If you stay flexible and positive, the visit will be much more successful and pleasant.
- **Thank and follow up with legislators in a timely fashion.** Legislators hear complaints all the time and, just like anybody else, they feel rewarded when they're shown appreciation for actions they may have taken on your behalf. Make sure that your thank you note includes a brief summary that repeats the major points or specific requests for action that you discussed during the meeting. Close the loop with NACDL so we can help with any follow-up action and integrate your information with other actions or visits.

For additional guidance or questions, please contact Monica L. Reid, Senior Director of Advocacy, at mreid@nacdl.org.