

# Personal Contact With Your Legislator

## DEVELOP A CONTINUING RELATIONSHIP

It takes a long time for legislation to be passed into law – sometimes years. Influencing a change in a representative’s position on fundamental issues often requires persistence. While letters, calls, emails, and faxes to your representative are critical in any legislative battle, the most effective form of communication with your legislator is fact-to-face communication.

A personal meeting requires your representative to deal more directly with your concerns, at the same time increasing his or her understanding of how important the issue is to you and other constituents. Above all, a personal meeting helps a citizen lobbyist to develop an ongoing relationship with the representative on important issues. The following information should help you to prepare for a successful meeting with your legislator.

### BEFORE THE MEETING

*Think* thoroughly about the purpose of the meeting. You will make a more effective presentation, and have a greater lobbying impact, if you go into the meeting with a clear understanding of what you are asking of your representative.

*Decide* if you want to go to the meeting alone, or gather people to go as a group. It can be helpful to have a delegation meet with the representative because it shows that the issue is not simply a personal concern but an issue of importance to many individuals and groups in the community. If a group is meeting with the representative, decide in advance.

*Arrange* a time for your meeting by calling your representative’s home office or office at the capital. You can reach all Representatives and Senators in Washington, D.C. by calling the Capitol Hill switchboard at 202-224-3121. Ask a staff member to arrange a time for you to see your legislator the next time he or she is in the home office. If you are going to be in Washington D.C., you can arrange to visit your representative on Capitol Hill if Congress is in session. Tell the staff member what issue you want to discuss and who will be accompanying you to the meeting.

*Prepare* for your meeting. You do not need to be an expert, but you should be familiar with the basics of the issue you will be discussing. Also familiarize yourself with the representative’s latest position or actions on the issue. Refer to letters from the representative or other public comments he or she has made recently on the issue.

### DURING THE MEETING

*Arrive* early, about five minutes before your appointment. This will give you a chance to think through your presentation and to meet the staff members in the office.

*Introduce* yourself politely to the representative. If there is a group of people with you, all members should introduce themselves. Begin by establishing common ground between yourself and your legislator, perhaps by expressing appreciation for a recent vote, co-

sponsorship of a bill, or public statements about an issue important to you.

*Present* your views precisely, politely, and persuasively. Start by telling your representative that you want support for your issue, then give your arguments. Know beforehand what you want to say, and come prepared with relevant facts. Keep your presentation short – no more than five minutes. Allow the representative to ask questions as you go along, and answer respectfully and thoughtfully with relevant facts and specific information. If you do not know the answer to a question, assure the representative that you will find the information and send it as soon as possible. Come prepared with a notebook and pen to take notes so that you will remember what you have volunteered to do.

*Ask* where the representative stands on the issue. Find out what action he or she intends to take. Press for specifics if you feel that the representative is evading the issue. If it is clear that he or she agrees with you, express your appreciation and encourage the representative to play a leadership role in legislation regarding the issue.

*Listen* intently to what the representative says. Be careful not to automatically tune out or get discouraged if you hear criticism in the representative's questions or comments. Instead, use the questions as a barometer of his or her concerns about the issue and as an opportunity to further clarify the issue.

*End* the meeting by thanking the representative for talking with you and for considering your concerns. Confirm that you will send any additional information that you have volunteered to find.

## **AFTER THE MEETING**

*Summarize* the legislator's response to your concerns, and note any indication of future action. Do this immediately following your meeting in order to make your records as detailed and accurate as possible. To assist lobbying efforts, send a copy to a national or state organization that is actively lobbying on this issue.

*Find* the answers to questions that were raised in the meeting, and any other information that you agreed to provide. If you need help finding information, contact a local or national organization that is working on related issues.

*Send* a thank-you letter to the representative and to the staff member who arranged the meeting. Restate your understanding of the representative's position and thank him or her for any support expressed during the meeting. Remember to enclose any information that you volunteered to find. If the meeting was inconclusive, include a summary of your position and any new information that supports your views.

## **Other personal contact**

**Questioning the Candidates:** Candidate debates, a formal appointment, or even a chance encounter during the campaign are all appropriate forums for questioning a candidate. The candidate who gets elected will then be more aware of constituent interest in your issues, and identify you as an active voice.

**Meeting with a staff person:** While staff members do not directly cast votes, they are key people who can give you valuable information and advice, and also report your concerns to the representative. Meeting with the legislator's staff also gives you an opportunity to build a closer relationship with the office. You then have someone in the office to call upon for future appointments and information.

**Dropping off information to local offices:** Sometimes it is not necessary to set up a formal meeting with the legislator. Another option is to drop off information to your legislator's local office. This could include editorials, a national study, or general background information. Your willingness to take the information to the office shows that you are very interested in the issue.

**Public events, fairs, parades:** During congressional recesses, most legislators return to their home districts to find out constituent's views on the issues. They will typically speak to local civic or professional groups, attend fairs or other events, or conduct town meetings. Take advantage of this opportunity! Meet the legislator at these events and ask for support for your issue. Although these opportunities do not allow for extensive conversations, the legislator is much more alert to the constituents' concerns if he or she has been publicly asked to outline a position. Another benefit of questioning a legislator publicly is that the rest of the audience, often including the press, also becomes more aware of your issue. You can contact the legislator's local office to obtain a schedule of appearances in your district.

If you have the opportunity, meet with the legislator at the beginning of his or her term. This gives you a chance to develop a working relationship and to get a sense of the legislator's general attitude on your issues. A meeting can also be vital during a congressional recess to discuss the latest legislative developments while the legislator is back home. This sends the legislator back to the capital with a sharper impression that your issue is one that constituents are monitoring closely. Finally, it is helpful to meet with a representative after an important vote or action in Congress, to either show gratitude for support or express disappointment in the vote and make it clear you will continue to lobby for a change in position on that issue.