

How to Meet with Legislators

PREPARING FOR THE MEETING

- **DO YOUR HOMEWORK!** Know exactly what you want to say and carefully review your message.
- If possible, compile information about the impact of specific issues on the Members of Congress' district/state. However, do not compile a long list of statistics: your elected officials will not remember them and they will lose their impact. Prepare a few dramatic numbers or anecdotes to illustrate your points. Collect recent local news articles that illustrate the issue. Like most people, legislators more easily remember examples conveyed in human and personal terms.
- To encourage legislators to support your positions, present materials that clearly articulate your views, using specific case examples when possible.
- Know the counterarguments and be ready to respectfully answer any questions or disagreements.
- Make sure everyone in your group is prepared. Brief everyone attending the meeting **PRIOR** to the meeting and make sure they have any written materials (biographical profile of legislators and their views, etc.) to review well ahead of time.
- Be organized. Agree ahead of time on the role each participant will take, who discusses what, and in what order participants will speak.
- If you are going as part of a larger coalition, meet ahead of time. It is unwise to have an internal debate or conversation in front of your elected official. Be certain everyone agrees on your group's central message and what you want to ask the legislator to do for you.
- Prepare a packet to leave with your legislator which could include background information, fact sheets, and/or newspaper clippings. Attach your card to the packet.

MAKING THE PRESENTATION

- Be on time!
- Begin by introducing yourselves.
- Explain to the legislator/staffer why you asked for the meeting.
- Present your concerns simply and directly. Get to your "bottom line" immediately. Be brief, direct, courteous, and positive. When presenting each issue, do not assume that your legislator has any prior knowledge of the subject. Presentation of each topic roughly should follow this outline:

BACKGROUND: Explain the issue in the simplest possible terms.

IMPACT: Explain how the issue directly affects your community or the group you represent.

RECOMMENDATION: Indicate what you would like your legislator to do.

- Do not fight with your legislator or staff members. Politely answer questions and concerns, but if you disagree, make your point and move on. Remember, you are meeting with the Member or staff person to inform him/her about your positions on issues.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, admit it, and promise to get back with the answer. Be sure to follow up with your answer as quickly as possible after the meeting.
- Listen well. Make sure you do not do all of the talking. Much of lobbying is listening, looking for indications of the legislator's views, and finding opportunities to provide good information. Give your legislator opportunities to ask questions or state his or her opinion. Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard. Also ask questions.
- Stay away from jargon and acronyms. Remember that your legislator deals with dozens, if not hundreds, of issues each week, each with its own "language."
- Thank your legislators if they have been supportive. They get thanked far less than they get criticized. They will appreciate your recognition.
- Be sure to ask for your legislator's support. If your legislator already is very supportive, ask him or her to cosponsor the relevant bill and/or take a leadership role in moving the bill through the process, getting additional cosponsors, or other ways.

FOLLOWING UP AFTER THE MEETING

- Send a note thanking the Member or staff person for meeting with you. Briefly summarize the main points of the meeting.
- Remember to follow up with responses to any questions the Member or staff person asked but you could not answer at the time.
- Do not think of the meeting as an isolated event. Although you may not have a face-to-face meeting again for some time, invite your elected officials to speak at an event or meeting. Think of other ways to maintain the relationship you have initiated.
- Report back. These reports are invaluable in developing legislative strategies and tracking Members' positions on issues important to the pro-immigration community.

Lobbying Tips

Before your lobby visit, designate one person to moderate the group discussion. After the moderator states the purpose of the lobby visit, each person should introduce himself or herself.

Know your facts. Review the fact sheets before the meeting with your member of Congress.

Personalize your pitch. Talk about your personal experience – how the issue affects you and your family. Do not try to be a policy expert. Your member of Congress needs to hear your point of view.

Be polite and positive – not confrontational. Present your information in a friendly manner. Do not get into arguments.

After your visit, **write a brief thank-you note** to the congressional office, thanking the member and staff for seeing you. Express your interest in continuing the relationship.

Keep in touch. Make appointments for follow-up visits to members' district offices. Invite them to local union meetings. Attend town hall meetings or other gatherings at which you can speak with them.