

Visiting with Your Member of Congress

Below are some suggestions to consider when planning a visit to a Congressional office.

Scheduling Your Meeting with a Member of Congress (or staff)

Make an appointment. First, fax your request in writing to the attention of the member's scheduler in their Washington, D.C. office. Contact information is available at www.house.gov / www.senate.gov or call the U.S. Capitol switchboard at 202/224-3121 and ask for your senators' or representative's office.

Most, if not all, offices require constituents to send a written request before they will schedule an appointment. Be sure to include in your letter the purpose of your visit (a personal meeting with the legislator), what issues you plan to discuss (be specific), and the date and preferred time for the meeting. Finally, make sure to include contact information for at least one person who will be available for the scheduler to contact to set the appointment. Typically, schedulers are very busy and do not have time to respond to all requests. It is recommended, therefore, that you follow-up with a phone call or e-mail to the scheduler within a few days after you have sent the letter.

Be persistent, but courteous. If you do not hear back from an office within a few days, try calling again. Always remain courteous, accommodating and understanding of the busy schedule the legislators keep. There may need to be several calls before a firm date for a meeting can be established. Don't give up!

Getting Ready for Your Meeting

Be prepared. You do not need to be an expert on each issue you are discussing, but you should be comfortable discussing the basics of each issue. If you cannot answer a question asked of you, it is perfectly appropriate to say, "I do not know, but I will find out the answer and follow-up with you (or more likely their staff member who is sitting in on the meeting)." This is a great way to develop a relationship with the legislator's staff after the meeting.

Bring supporting materials. Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials supporting your position. Legislators and their staff find statistics valuable, and statistics that are relevant to their home district and/or state are particularly valuable. It also is helpful to share with the member information and personal examples that demonstrate clearly the impact or benefits associated with a particular issue or piece of legislation.

Establish a spokesperson if meeting as a group. To avoid talking against each other or repeating information, identify a spokesperson for the group. If you are discussing several issues, it might be helpful to assign a different spokesperson for each issue so everyone gets a chance to participate. One person should also take notes for future reference.

Be prompt and patient. When it is time to meet with a Member, be punctual and be patient. Plan to arrive 5 minutes beforehand; however, it is not uncommon for a Senator or Representative to be late, or to have a meeting interrupted due to floor votes and the Member's crowded schedule. If interruptions do occur, be flexible. When the opportunity presents itself, continue your meeting with the Member's staff. **Do not be surprised if you get to meet only with the Member's staff.** Legislators often are very busy with their other duties (attending hearings and voting) and do not have time to personally attend every constituent meeting. They rely heavily on their staff to meet with constituents and understand each issue. Staff members are likely to have a very in-depth understanding of your issue, and building a relationship with them can be very important.

Be personable. When the legislator or aide enters the room, each participant in your group should introduce himself or herself – and provide a business card if possible. Talk about your involvement in the community and any group you may represent. Establish a personal connection with the Representative, Senator, or aide in the meeting. If possible, describe for the Member how you or your group can be of assistance to him or her. Members of Congress want to represent the best interests of their district or state. Wherever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the Member's constituency. Remember, you and your patients are constituents. .

State the purpose of your visit clearly. Legislators and their staff are very busy and time is a valuable commodity; do not waste the available time! Stick to the topic and talking points; know what to say and make your requests clear. If you feel they are trying to steer you off track by talking about too many other issues, politely return to your main idea, “While this too is an important issue, I would really like to spend more time talking about ...” Where it is appropriate, ask for a commitment.

Follow up. Be sure to get the name of any staff members you meet for follow-up. Ask for their business card so you can spell their name correctly and have their email address. Write the Member/aide a thank you note to express your appreciation and briefly re-state the issues discussed and the way you would like to see them respond to the issue (i.e., co-sponsoring a bill). Also, offer yourself as a resource in the future; always keep them up to date on the issue. Provide, or identify, when you will follow-up with any information that was requested during your meeting or that will help emphasize your key points.

What's Next?

Determine whether your meeting was a success. Sometimes it is difficult to answer that question. If your member co-sponsors important legislation that you discuss, then your impact is more apparent. Other times, it takes several encounters to establish a mutually beneficial relationship where the legislator eventually reaches out to you to ask the specialty to weigh-in on a particular piece of legislation. Day on the Hill is designed with the following three goals: educating members on what OMSs do; lobbying for support on particular issues; and, building long-term relationships with legislators.

Get others involved. Part of following-up includes reporting back to your community and getting in touch with others who have organized similar meetings with Members of Congress. Report back to your colleagues at your state OMS society meeting about how your meetings went, which issues were well received, and determine if further mobilization is needed for any particular issue.

Follow up in the district. If your initial meeting was in Washington, D.C., follow-up with a meeting back home in the Congressional district. This provides an opportunity to further develop your relationship with the legislator and offers the opportunity for others to get involved in addition to those who were able to travel to D.C. Developing relationships with the district staff is equally important as relationship building in the D.C. offices.

Serve as a local resource. Volunteer to be a resource on healthcare issues. Legislators are always looking for experts in their respective fields to provide a unique perspective; you are an expert in healthcare. Their may be an opportunity to volunteer to serve on your legislator's healthcare task force (if they have one).

Volunteer on their campaign. In order for legislators to support our issues, they must be re-elected. It takes both money and volunteers to run a successful campaign. Volunteering for a legislator's campaign provides interaction with the legislator and it is always greatly appreciated.