

What you can do ...

VISIT A PUBLIC OFFICIAL



Visiting public officials is one of the most effective ways to shape public policy. You not only have all the advantages of face-to-face dialogue. You also build relationships that can help you gain additional support and access in the future.

If the idea of meeting with a public official seems intimidating, remember that public officials are elected to serve their constituents. They need to know what you care about. You are important to them for another reason as well. You vote, and you represent the views of other voters.

Public officials are very busy people. So you need to plan ahead and use your limited meeting time well. You should also be prepared for last-minute changes, including a meeting that turns out to be with a staff member instead of the official. That should not discourage you. Staff members are often very influential, and they can be helpful if you build relationships with them.

The following guidelines will help you prepare for a meeting and maximize the impact of your face time.

- **Organize your group.** You don't have to meet with an official as part of a group, but you may be more effective and more comfortable if you do. So recruit several friends or acquaintances who share your concerns and want to advocate the same position. Agree with them on several convenient meeting dates and times. If the meeting will be with a legislator, try to choose dates when the legislature is not in session.
- **Schedule the meeting.** Call the official's office well in advance of your preferred dates and ask to speak with the scheduler. Tell the scheduler who you are, what you want to discuss, and when you would like to meet. Remember to mention that you and the other members of your group are constituents. Be prepared to negotiate on the date and time. Follow up the conversation with a brief confirmation letter or e-mail.
- **Prepare for the meeting.** Preparation is absolutely essential. Begin by deciding exactly what message you want to deliver and what the role of each group member will be. You will need a spokesperson to lead off. Other group members should have supporting and, ideally, somewhat different stories to tell.

Try to find out where the official stands on the issue and, more generally, his or her major policy interests. This will help you decide how to frame the issue and connect it to something the official cares about. The official's website is usually a good source. Look for the official's bio and the topics of his/her press releases. If the official is a legislator, look also at the committees on which he or she serves.

Identify the *local* interest in the issue. Public officials care most about the communities they represent. So pull together some key facts and examples about local impacts. This is where your stories fit in. Try to shape the impacts to what you know about the official's major interests.

Boil all this down to a 90-second speech. You may not have much more time with the official. Even if you do, the speech will set the agenda and help keep the dialogue on point.

The speech should include:

- Who you are—your names and any relevant organizations you belong to. If you are formally representing an organization, be sure to make that clear. Also make clear that you live and/or work in the community the official represents.
- The issue you came to talk about.
- What, specifically, you want the official to do—for example, support or oppose a piece of legislation. For legislation, use the official name of the bill and the bill number, if possible.
- What the action will achieve—in other words, the overall impact it will have on the community.

Make copies of written information you can leave behind—enough for the official, several staff members, and all the members in your group. Fact sheets developed by organizations like SOME are good leave-behinds. If you are representing an organization, make copies of information about it too. Write your names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses on the materials or attach business cards, if you have them.

Have a practice session shortly before the meeting. It may be helpful to role play, with one group member acting as the official. Think of questions you might be asked and rehearse brief answers.

- **Arrive early and be prepared to wait.** Plan to arrive 10 minutes before the scheduled meeting time. Tell the person at the front desk who you are and that you have a scheduled appointment. Don't feel put down if you have to wait. Public officials often run behind schedule.
- **Manage the dialogue.** You want to get your message out, learn the official's views, respond to his or her doubts or questions, and secure a commitment. So begin with your 90-second speech and offer copies of the fact sheets you've brought along. Then pause to let the official respond.

If dialogue does not flow from there, expand the message with the facts and stories you've prepared.

Keep an eye on the time and be sensitive to cues the official is ready for you to leave. Use your last minutes to thank the official for his or her time and to repeat your request.

If asked a question you can't answer, don't guess or try to make up an answer. Tell the official you don't know, but will get back to him or her with an answer. It's a great opportunity to build the relationship and reinforce your message.

Don't attack the official or threaten reprisals if he or she disagrees with your position. Remember that personal attacks harden positions and that you may want to have your views considered on another issue in the future. Also avoid disparaging remarks about others who disagree with your position or about government officials or the government in general.

- **Follow up.** Send a brief thank you letter as soon as possible. Express appreciation for the time the official spent with you and any commitment he or she made. Include any information you promised to provide or reiterate your promise to do so. One way or the other, deliver what you promised.

If the official acts as you requested, write another thank you letter. It's very important that officials know when they have acted as their constituents wish—and that constituents are watching.