

LEGISLATIVE STRATEGIES: KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS AND COMMUNICATIONS WITH MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Field office and TSC management frequently meet and deal with Members of Congress or their staffs. Such business can be conducted in either the Member's home, district office or occasionally with the Member's office on Capitol Hill. Following are some strategies you can use to make sure your meetings and letters are effective and you get the results you want. These strategies may be useful in dealing with beneficiary issues brought to your attention by the Member. They will also be effective in providing feedback to Members on pending legislation.

The NCSSMA Grassroots Committee has put together a number of packages to assist NCSSMA members in making the initial contacts that are needed to gain access to Members of Congress. These packages include suggested language for initial appointment letters, follow up letters, and thank you letters based on the results of completed contacts with Members of Congress.

These informational packages can be accessed by visiting the NCSSMA website at www.ncssma.org. The website is also important in that NCSSMA members can identify their congressional representatives in case a future contact is needed with a particular Member of Congress in relation to specific legislation.

EFFECTIVE LETTERS

- If you know the member of Congress or their staff, say so at the beginning of the letter. Doing this may cause the person opening the mail to give your letter priority treatment. If you know the staff person handling the issue, send a copy of the letter to that person's attention.
- Keep your letters short. Letters longer than one typed page (two at the most) are ineffective.
- In a brief opening paragraph, concisely state your purpose for writing. Use subsequent paragraphs to support your position. Stick to one issue in your letter, if possible.
- If you are writing about a bill, cite the number and title of the bill (e.g., H.R. 2696, To amend title 5, United States Code, to provide more equitable policies relating to overtime pay for Federal employees and the accumulation and use of credit hours; S. 1885, A bill to amend title 5, United States Code, to provide for more equitable policies relating to overtime pay for federal employees, limitations on premium pay, and the accumulation and use of credit hours).
- Be specific and factual. Support your position with an analysis of how the bill is likely to affect you. Relate your views to the Member's committee assignments and constituents.
- Be polite. Abusive letters will receive little or no notice, at best. Overly emotional arguments often are not taken seriously.
- Ask for a response that states the Member's position on the issue. If the Member supports your views, be sure to thank him or her. If not, be sure to keep the lines of communication open, since he or she may be willing to support another issue important to you in the future.
- Use the following address styles for Members of Congress.

For Members of the Senate:

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator _____:

For Members of the House:

The Honorable _____
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative _____:

EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

- Make an appointment in writing, identifying the issue to be discussed, the amount of time needed, and the persons who will attend the meeting. It is important not to overwhelm the Member with a large number of people – five or six is reasonable.
- If more than one person is attending, select a spokesperson. Brief all meeting participants from your organization in advance and decide who will say what.
- Be prepared. Think of questions that the Member or staff may ask. Know your issue (including bill numbers and titles, if there are pending bills) and what the Member's position is.
- Get to the point. Always assume you will have no more than 15 minutes with the Member, so don't waste time. Clearly state at the beginning of the meeting what action you want from the Member.
- Be factual and honest. Don't try to sell your issue by attacking the honesty or motives of the opposition. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so and offer to follow up with a letter or telephone call.
- Don't use acronyms and jargon unless you are sure that the Member will know what you are talking about.
- Listen. Find out what the Member is concerned about and respond to those concerns by presenting your position in a manner that is attractive to the Member.
- Try to get a firm commitment from the Member on his or her position. Make sure that you follow up with staff to ensure that the commitment is honored.
- Always be polite and, if the Member does not support your position, don't become overly argumentative. If you can't overcome the reasons for the disagreement, try to make sure the Member won't be outspoken against you.
- Leave briefing materials or fact sheets with the Member's staff and follow up with staff, if necessary, through telephone calls or additional letters.
- Thank the Member and his or her staff for their time in a brief follow-up note.

MEETINGS ON CAPITOL HILL

1. **Be on time for all meetings.**
2. **Expect the Member to be late.** This is normal due to floor votes, committee meetings, and last minute schedule changes. While waiting, meet with staff or review your priorities and presentation.
3. **Select a spokesperson to lead the meeting discussion.**
4. **Brief all participants in advance of the meeting – know your priorities.**
5. **Keep introductions brief and limit chitchat.** Expect to spend no more than 15 minutes with the Member. Use your time wisely.
6. **Be yourself – relax.**
7. **State PRIORITIES quickly and efficiently. Stick to your message.**
8. **Keep your message BRIEF.** Identify only the key points and explain why the issue is important to the Member.
9. **Use a one-pager.** Limit your request, key facts, and statistics to **ONE PAGE**.
10. **Be factual and honest. Know your facts.** If you do not know the answer to a question, admit it and promise to get the information soon. Follow up.
11. **Use anecdotal stories.** These can be success stories, local hardships, whatever makes your presentation stronger.
12. **View the meeting as a building block.** Your goal is to establish a long-term relationship.
13. **Do not get into conflicts with the Member.** Avoid contentious issues.
14. **Be respectfully assertive.** Urge the Member to be an agent for change.
15. **Invite the Member and staff to visit your office.** Schedule follow-up meetings with the Member when they are in the community.
16. **Know when the member is up for re-election. Know the Member's committee assignments.**
17. **Understand the difference between committee and personal staff.**
Committee staff: Policy and fact-oriented. Less political. Less friendly.
Personal staff: Concerned with state issues and constituent issues. Political.

18. **Close the deal. Tell the Member what you want and get a commitment for action** (i.e., co-sponsor a bill, send a letter, contact other Members or appropriate committees in support of your concern). **Follow up with staff.**
19. **Thank the Member and staff.**
20. **Send a follow-up thank you letter.** Mention staff you have worked with on the issue. Maintain regular communications with the Member and staff.
21. **Get to know your Washington office scheduler and in-state scheduler**
22. **Get to know the Legislative Assistant.** This is a critical person in the office for follow-ups.
23. **Pay attention to TIMING.** Schedule future meetings around key events (e.g., appropriations schedule, committee hearings).