

Rights Working Group

Advocacy Toolkit

2013

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2013 LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

Legislative visits are an important part of any advocacy campaign, and are one of the key ways organizations and communities can make their voices heard to their representatives in Congress. This toolkit offers guidelines for how to set up appointments, plan your meeting, and follow up on your visits to Congress, whether in your home district or in Washington, D.C. Throughout this toolkit we refer to Members of the House and Senate as Members of Congress (MOC).

For the issues that the Rights Working Group coalition is working on in 2013, including just immigration reform, banning racial profiling, and restoring due process, it is essential for MOCs to hear from their constituents about how these issues impact people's lives and what must be done to reform these systems.

Rights Working Group staff is always available to answer any questions not covered by this toolkit. For support on planning for your meeting, contact Alissa Escarce, Policy Associate, at aescarce@rightsworkinggroup.org.

Legislative visits allow us all to strategically exercise our political and civil rights to advance our campaigns. We look forward to working with you to demonstrate our collective power to those who represent us.

FOR THOSE PARTICIPATING IN IN-DISTRICT ADVOCACY HOW TO SET UP MEETINGS WITH THE OFFICES OF YOUR CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

Meeting in person with the office of your congressional representative is one of the most effective ways to influence your lawmakers. We recommend that you call or fax the district office of your congressional representative and request a meeting on the specific issue you wish to discuss with his or her office. You will likely be directed to a staff person who works for your congressional representative on the specific legislative, regulatory and policy issues you wish to discuss. The staff members of elected representatives have great influence on the positions and votes of their bosses. However, you should still feel comfortable in making a request to see your congressional representative.

Arranging an In-District Meeting

To arrange a meeting:

1. If you have not determined whom to target, visit www.senate.gov and www.house.gov to find your MOC. When referring to a MOC, you should refer to him or her as Congressman XX or Congresswoman YY, or Senator ZZ. If you need support determining whom to meet with please email Alissa Escarce at aescarce@rightsworkinggroup.org.
2. Call or email the office of the MOC with your request for a meeting. Some congressional offices have special forms or procedures for meeting requests. This information is usually available on the MOC's website.

3. Once connected with MOC's office, ask to speak with the staff member who works on the issues you want to raise (ie. racial profiling, immigration, etc.). If you wish to meet with your MOC rather than a staffer, you will likely need to make a request, in writing, to the congressional representative's scheduler. Your written request should include details similar to those that appear in the talking points we've suggested below (#4). We've also provided a sample written request for a meeting which you may send by email. You can ask the congressional office for the scheduler's contact details.
4. Once connected with the relevant staff member, we recommend these talking points:

"I am a constituent from *[city or town in your state/district]*. I am calling to request a meeting with the *[Senator or Congressman / Congresswoman]* to discuss *[the issues you will raise]* while *[she/he]* is in *[state/district]* during the congressional recess . I represent *[name of your organization]*, a group dedicated to *[include a brief note on the work of your organization]*. I will be attending the meeting with *[detail the number of individuals who will accompany you]* from *[name their state or district and an organizational affiliation, if relevant]*."

Important Note: When you speak to the office, it is very important that you are specific about the exact issues you would like to discuss so that you are connected with the appropriate staffer.

Sample Written Request for a Meeting

[Your Address]

[Your Representative's/Senator's Address]

[Date]

Dear Mr./Ms. *[Name of Appointment Secretary/Scheduler]*:

I am *[title and name of your congressional representative]*'s constituent and live in *[city or town in your state/district]*. I represent *[name of your organization]*, a group dedicated to *[include a brief note on the work of your organization]*.

I am deeply concerned about *[the issues you will raise]*. *[You may wish to note in a sentence or two the specific type, scope and impact of the issue(s) as it exists in your community here]*.

I would like to meet in the district office in *[city or town in your state/district]* with *[name of Senator or Representative]* while *[she/he]* will be in the *[state or district]* during the upcoming congressional recess to discuss *[the issues you will raise]*. I will be accompanied by *[detail the number of individuals who will accompany you]* from *[name their state or district and an organizational affiliation, if relevant]*.

Please contact me if it will be possible to meet with the *[Senator or Representative]* or an appropriate staff person this April. Thank you for considering this request. I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Your Telephone]

[Your Email]

PREPARING FOR YOUR MEETING

Who Should Attend the Meeting?

Determine who you'd like to have participate in a meeting with your Senator or Representative. Although you can attend a meeting alone, we recommend that you go with 2-5 individuals so that the congressional office can hear a range of related perspectives and interests.

If you are working with a coalition, we strongly encourage you to invite your coalition partners. The more people you represent the stronger your position. Some meetings are a great opportunity to develop leaders in your community. Meetings provide more than information; they give your leaders an opportunity to learn about the advocacy process and interact with your congressional members.

Once you've identified who will attend the meeting, break down tasks for research and coordinate a preparatory meeting before you attend a meeting at the congressional office.

Research Your Member of Congress

- Visit your congressional member's website and read his or her basic biographical information and research his or her voting record. Members' official websites can be found at www.house.gov or www.senate.gov. You may also want to visit www.votesmart.org and www.opencongress.org for more details on members' voting records and positions on issues.
- You can also start by doing a basic Google search. Analyze your MOC's positions on the issues you will raise.
- Talk to your family, friends and colleagues and ask them what they know about the member with whom you're interested in meeting.

Brush Up on the Issues

- Rights Working Group has provided issue briefs and fact sheets on the website www.rightsworkinggroup.org/content/resources
- Determine the form and impact of the issues in your community. You may want to gather stories, news reports, and studies by credible sources in your community. Personal stories can be powerful advocacy tools that engage legislators and their staff and relate legislative decisions to their human impact. In doing your research, note whether your legislators may be more swayed by stories affecting certain populations.

HOW TO LOBBY

** Please note that even if you are unable to schedule a meeting with a particular congressional office, you can still plan a drop-by visit. Some congressional district offices have specific times for drop-by visits while congressional members are in state/district. You can find out about these specific hours by calling the congressional district office. If it is not possible to meet your congressional member or an appropriate staff member at that time, you can leave a packet of information about your organization and background materials on your issues with the staff member who greets you. It is also possible to do drop-by visits with congressional members and their staff in Washington.*

BEFORE THE MEETING

If you are attending the meeting with a group, make sure you have a preparatory meeting.

If you are visiting as part of a group, be sure to identify:

- One member of your group to lead or facilitate the meeting.
- The individual or group will speak on the different issues and who will share case studies or personal stories. We recommend sharing personal stories, news reports, and credible research studies in the meeting. Stories and concrete findings from credible research studies are powerful advocacy tools.
- A note taker to capture what the MOC or staffer says in response to your asks and note any follow up by completing the report-back form.

Being prepared for your visit is critical to having an effective meeting.

- **Prepare** individual remarks. Keep your statements brief. If sharing personal stories, focus on essential details and try to keep them under 3 minutes. Remember, sharing personal stories of affected individuals (clients, family members or friends) can be very powerful.
- **Rehearse.** Practice what you will say at the meeting. This will help you ensure that you raise all the key points and that you sound natural and not as though you're reading from a script.
- **Prepare your materials.** It is generally a good idea to bring background materials on your issues to give to the staff member. Bring the following items to your meeting: (1) the agenda you have developed with your group, (2) the issue briefs and other drop pieces on racial profiling that RWG provides and (3) any relevant materials developed by your organization and others that you want to share.
- **Dress appropriately.** When possible, business attire or business casual is generally recommended for any visits you make to congressional offices. However, you should dress in what is most comfortable for you.

AT THE MEETING

Suggested Meeting Agendas for Congressional Visits

Your meeting's agenda and structure will depend on the amount of time you are able to schedule to meet with your legislator's office. Please modify these agendas for your group as appropriate:

30 Minute Meeting

1. Brief introduction of the members attending meeting and the organizations represented (5 minutes).
2. Brief introduction of the issue and your asks. This is a time to share personal stories from your district or state. (10 minutes)
3. Present your request or recommendation. (3 minutes)
4. Questions and answers. Allow time for some back and forth between your delegation and the staff member (10 minutes).
5. Say thank you and make a follow-up plan with the legislator or staff member (2 minutes).

15 Minute Meeting

1. Brief introduction of the members of your delegation and the organizations represented (2 minutes).
2. Brief introduction of the issue and your asks. This is a time to share personal stories from your district or state. (8 minutes)
3. Present your request or recommendation. (3 minutes)
4. Say thank you and make a follow-up plan with the legislator or staff member (2 minutes).

Tips on Introductions

- Remember your meeting is not long so do not spend too much time on introductions alone.
- Let the facilitator lead so they can move the meeting along.
- Have each individual introduce themselves with the organization they are associated with.
- Describe your organization **briefly** including the number of member you represent.
- Remind your congressional representative or staff member that you are a constituent.

Additional Tips

- Share only what you know. It is crucial that you establish yourself as a credible source. **If you don't know something, don't be afraid to say so.** You can tell the staff member that you will find out the answer and get back to them. *Rights Working Group staff can help you find these answers; contact us for help.*
- Keep it short. Congressional offices are exceedingly busy and they will greatly appreciate your ability to get to the point. Your request may be interrupted so **remember to get to your "asks" in within the first few minutes of your conversation.**

- Be polite even if you disagree. A simple, warm greeting will be welcomed but an abrasive manner will likely be counterproductive and harm your working relationship with the office.
- Be constructive but firm. Avoid criticism but be firm in your positions. If you disagree with a position the congressional office is taking, make your point and move on. In the event that you meet with a MOC's staff person, rather than the MOC, you should not be disappointed. Meetings with staffers are equally as important, as MOCs rely on their staffers for information. Sometimes meetings can occur anywhere, in lobbies or hallways. Do not take this personally, as it happens quite commonly.

Remember

- **Explain the issue.** Present the facts in an orderly and straight-forward fashion. Avoid jargon and acronyms. Don't presume that the legislator or the staff member has any prior knowledge of the subject. You can ask the legislator or staff member what he/she knows about the subject and then tailor your remarks accordingly.
- **Relay the impact** of the programs and policies as they directly affect your community. Discuss personal examples and relevant news stories and research studies. Consult RWG's issue briefs on for more information.
- **Make your specific 'asks'** or recommendations.
- **Establish a plan for follow-up.** Get the name and contact details of any staff member with whom you spoke and discuss with the legislator or staff member what your next steps for engagement with that office might be and a timeline, if any.
- **Don't forget to leave your packet** of materials and contact information with the congressional office.
- **Thank** the congressional representative or staffer for their time.

AFTER THE MEETING

Your reports are invaluable to us; please inform RWG staff on how your meeting went by filling in a report-back form on the RWG website: www.rightsworkinggroup.org

Formally thank the office with a letter or email and follow-up with the information or materials you promised the office. Commend the office publicly if appropriate—in letters to the editor, for example.

Seek creative ways to maintain your relationship with the congressional office—send them relevant news articles or follow-up with phone calls before relevant votes, for example.

THANK YOU!