

VISITING ELECTED OFFICIALS

Effectively engage public officials during face-to-face meetings



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Visiting your members of Congress—either in Washington, D.C. or in their district and state offices—is a powerful way to build relationships and advocate for strong public policy. By sharing why as a constituent you care about issues affecting neighbors living in poverty and struggling with hunger, as well as God's creation, you can influence lawmaker's decisions. As a constituent, it's your role to tell officials how their votes will affect your community and our larger world. Your visits can motivate them to act.

Advocates are often nervous during their first “lobby visit.” Here are a few tips on how to plan and conduct your meeting with the lawmaker's office:

Start early

Contact the legislator's office several weeks before your visit. Members of Congress often have meeting request sections of their website—complete this online form and follow up with the office if you haven't received a response within two weeks. If you continue to have difficulty, call the member's district or state office and explain the situation to a local staffer.

Be polite

Understand that it is very likely you will not meet with your Member of Congress, but rather a member of his or her staff.

- Address each member of the staff with respect. Each staff member is extremely valuable to your mission—they inform the legislator and can be a great internal champion for your cause. Additionally, many current staffers have political ambitions of their own—you may be meeting a future Member of Congress or Governor.
- Do not be insulted by meeting space, time spent in the office, the age of a staff member, or if you meet with a staff member instead of the elected official. Space and time on Capitol Hill is limited, and legislators rely heavily on the information relayed to them through their staff.

Come prepared

- Understand your audience: What parts of your state does this representative's district include? On what committees does he or she serve? Where has this member been on this issue in the past?
- Bring informational material to reference during the meeting and leave it with the office when you leave. Make sure your business card or contact information is attached and clearly noticeable, in case the office has follow-up questions.

- Personalize your message based on regional knowledge, the member's previous occupation, his or her interests (look at what committees he or she serves on), his or her voting record, his or her faith background or community. Find "hooks" from the member's background and life to make your issue relevant and your point engaging.
- Structure the meeting so you remember to hit all your points. (See below, "*Congressional Visit Planning Sheet*," to help plan for your meeting.)
- If you have a large group, delegate what members of the group will be speaking. You may want to designate a person for introductions, two or three people to tell personal stories, a person to ask the Member for action, and a person responsible for leaving behind the informational material. (See the *Congressional Visit Planning Sheet* for support.)
- Do your best to engage in a conversation with the staff member or the Member. Work for two-sided dialogue, but get to the point: most constituent meetings on Capitol Hill are shorter than 30 minutes.

Be focused

- Make sure you are brief and concise on your issue. Prepare talking points, and do your best to tailor them to the Member and his or her constituency.
- Ask for something and try to get a clear answer to your request. ("Does Senator Smith support an increase of \$Y for X?" or "Would Congressman Smith sign this Dear Colleague Letter in support of X?") Understand that although the staff member may be unable to provide a definitive answer, it is still important that you are direct in your request.
- At the meeting's conclusion, be clear on what the next step is by specifying when and how you will be contacting them again. Be sure to get the staffer's business card.

Follow up

- Send a thank you letter, acknowledging the time the legislator or staff member spent with you. Reiterate what was discussed.
- Continue to build a relationship with to the legislator and his or her staff.

The ELCA Washington Office often helps facilitate Capitol Hill visits for church groups, Lutheran College spring breaks, or seminary classes. Reach out to them at washingtonoffice@elca.org.

CONGRESSIONAL VISIT PLANNING SHEET

Member: _____

Date of visit: _____

Time of visit: _____

Office location: _____

Facts about the Member of Congress

In-state home: _____

Party: _____

Serving in Congress since: _____

Up for re-election in: _____

Committees: _____

Leadership roles held: _____

Record on this issue: _____

Organization for the meeting: *Who in our group will do what?*

Spokesperson/Introductions & Conclusion: _____

Note-taker: _____

Time-keeper: _____

Speaker:

What they will say:

About the issue:

Desired action taken by the Member: _____

If relevant, bill number and name: _____

On the back of this page, prepare talking points about issue.

Follow-up:

Who will write and sent thank you note(s): _____

What additional information needs to be sent and who will send this:
