

How to Have an Effective Visit With Your Legislator

Meeting with your legislators is one of the most effective ways that you can influence the legislative process. Members are more likely to support positions that their constituents feel strongly about, and there is no better way to display your passion for an issue than by taking the time to have a face-to-face meeting. Once you [have your meeting set](#), you'll need to prepare and know what to expect.

Here are some tips to ensure you have a productive meeting:

Meeting Preparation

1. **Identify your main message.** Before the meeting, determine what your main message is that you want to convey to your legislator. For instance, "please play a leadership role in enhancing our services for Drug Addicted pregnant women and drug exposed infants" or "please support the newly designed system of care" or "please support our additional funding in the Medicaid funding shortfall."
2. **Determine roles for participants:** (if more than one person is meeting with the legislator)
 - Designate a group leader to open and close the meeting, to deliver any leave-behind materials, and to keep the discussion moving.
 - Identify a different person to present each issue or main message.
3. **Prepare and practice for the meeting.** It's always a good idea to run-through what you intend to say before the meeting itself. If you are meeting with a group of people, have each person practice their part in front of the group. Time permitting—hold a dry run of the entire meeting. If you are going in alone have your 15 minute meeting prepared, your 3 minute meeting prepared, and your 30 second elevator speech prepared.

During the Meeting

1. **Dress nicely.** Business attire is appropriate. Don't let your appearance detract from your message or impair your credibility.
2. **Introduce yourself.** Tell your legislator or staff person your name, where you are from, and that you are a constituent. If you represent an organization, note its name, where the group is located, and the size of its membership. This is a good time to introduce what FAHSC is and how you are a part of a state organization representing your county or counties.
3. **Start with a compliment.** If possible, thank the member for a good stand he or she recently took on an issue and/or mention if you voted for the member. At a

minimum, thank them for taking the time to meet with you.

4. **Take the initiative.** State clearly and concisely what issue you want to discuss, what your position is, and what action you want the member to take. Follow this with facts about why he or she should take your position. (This is where you will refer to the legislative white sheets and USE the numbers and data. They want to hear how the state is affected by the ask.)
5. **Make a local connection.** Stress how the issue will affect the legislator's district or state and, if possible, tell a personal story that highlights your experience with the issue and why you care about it. This is a great time to share a client story and how Healthy Start has changed their lives. Try to use local numbers at the point to let your legislator know of the local impact even though it is a state issue.
6. **Bring a "leave-behind" document.** Give the legislator a brief fact sheet (one to two pages) that outlines your position and explains what the bill does (if there is one) and why he or she should support your viewpoint. This is where you can leave a folder with the white papers and your business card.
7. **Drop names.** Mention any other organizations, important individuals, government officials, and legislators that support your position. This is a great time to mention your community partnerships and how important they are in completing our mission.
8. **Be a good listener.** After you make your pitch, allow the legislator to respond. Bring the conversation back to the issue at hand if he or she goes off on a tangent or tries to evade your position.
9. **Don't answer what you don't know.** It's okay to not know all the answers. Answer questions to the best of your ability, and if you don't know an answer, admit it. This ensures you maintain credibility and it provides an opportunity for a relevant follow-up letter to provide any additional information.
10. **Ask a direct question.** Ask a question to which the legislator can respond "yes" or "no." For example, "Can we count on you to cosponsor the bill?" Press politely for a commitment, unless the member is clearly opposed to your position or to making a commitment.
11. **Thank the legislator.** Always thank the legislator for his or her time at the end of the meeting, even if he or she did not agree with your position.

After the Meeting

1. **Write down your impressions.** Immediately after the meeting, write down any information you learned about the legislator's position or concerns.
2. **Follow up.** Always follow up with a prompt thank you letter. In the letter, reiterate your key points and any commitments the legislator made to you. Include all follow-up information you promised to provide.
3. **Let us know how it went.** Be sure [to let the Legislative Committee know](#) the results of your meeting and send in so we can update the spreadsheets. The more details you can provide us with the better.

General Tips To Keep In Mind

- No single participant should talk for more than five minutes at a time.
- Identify a local angle. How does the issue affect the legislator's district or state?
- Learn about your legislator in advance
 - What kind of constituency does the legislator have—rural, urban, suburban? What are the principal influences there—labor, business, farmers?
 - What were the winning margins in his or her previous elections? If they were narrow, the legislator knows he or she is vulnerable.
 - What is his or her background: upbringing, education, wealth, and other relevant previous experience?
 - What sort of ties does the legislator have to state or local organizations?
 - Where do the legislator's campaign contributions come from?
 - Who or what influences this legislator the most?
- Always do research on the Legislator; know the committees they are on, or chair as an example.
- Know things that they are very passionate about; and then try and tie in our effort with their focus area.
- Always follow up - if the Legislator asks a question and you don't have the answer, follow up with the answer.
- Never interject if Legislator is speaking, even if they interrupt you.
- Know the other areas of your community, as the Legislator may ask how your program is or isn't like, another program.
- Know who you are name dropping; as never know the relationship between legislator and that individual.

- Keep comments positive, and don't speak negatively of another program or community leader.

Common Pitfalls

- Members of the legislature are very busy and could be called out of the meeting—or not available at all—leaving you with their legislative aide that handles the issue. Don't let this discourage you. Meeting with a staff member can be equally or even more productive than meeting with the member. Staff can have tremendous influence over legislators and in many cases know far more about the legislation than the legislators themselves. Be sure to ask the staff person to convey your views and legislative requests to their boss.
- Change of topic—the legislator may hijack the agenda or waste valuable time by bringing up unrelated issues. While it is important to be cordial and flexible, this is a meeting for you to relay your concerns to an elected official. Quickly acknowledge and address their issue and redirect the discussion back to the agenda. Don't let them take you off-course for more than a moment.