

## *How to Set Up a Site Visit*

Site visits are a great way to get legislators informed about the work of your organization. They are an important part of the advocacy calendar, because they give your legislators a first hand view of what government investments and non-profits are doing for kids. Site visits put faces to issues and budget requests. For example, taking a legislator to a place where summer meals are distributed will hopefully help the legislator see how government investment and community participation is working for the kids they see. So when the legislator votes in the next session on funding for a program such as summer feeding, they can speak to the need.

---

### How to Set Up a Site Visit

Call your legislator and arrange an appointment for a site visit. Let the legislator know that you would like him/her to tour your facility. Such a tour should be appealing to the legislator because they will not have to be prepared and it is a somewhat informal meeting.

Since legislators' schedules are often very tight, you want to be flexible in scheduling a site visit. However, if possible, try to pick a day when the legislator will have the greatest contact with kids or parents. Always pick a day where there will be some activity for the legislator to view.

Arrange for a team of folks (3-4) to do the tour of your facility, choose a board member or someone with whom legislator may have a good relationship. Create a team that could answer a range of questions about your organization, such as how you are funded, what research supports your work, etc.

Make the legislator feel comfortable asking questions. Do not expect the legislator to know any thing about your program. Legislators have to know about many issues and may specialize in areas unrelated to your work. Give basic information on your work and encourage questions, even tough ones.

When giving the "tour" spend the time describing your work not "lobbying". Explain what you do rather than what you want the legislator to do (make time for this later in the visit). You want the legislator to understand what you do and why it is effective.

After the tour, create a time for debriefing. Find a room where you can sit down with the legislator and get their reactions to what they saw. Be sure to answer all of their questions. If you don't know the answer to their question, let the legislator know that you will get back to them with the answer (be sure to do this!)

During the debriefing make sure the legislator knows how decisions made in your state capital affect the work of your organization. If your organization receives federal or state money say so. Feel free to ask the legislator directly if they would support funding for your program or for policy changes your organization is requesting. Try to get some kind

of commitment from your legislator before he/she leaves: a commitment to support funding, a commitment to read more information on an issue, a commitment to meet with you again, etc.

Be sure to thank the legislator for their time both at the end of your site visit and by mail after the visit. You want to maintain communication with the legislator and ensure that the legislator recognizes you as a resource for them.

## *5 Steps and Tips to a Successful Meeting with a Legislator*

### *Steps*

1. Say who you are.
2. Say who you are with (if you are connected to an organization).
3. Say why you are there -- the one sentence version.
4. Make your case -- the 3-5 minute version.
5. Ask for something -- their vote, their sponsorship of a bill, etc.

### *Tips*

1. Try to leave something in writing a fact sheet, newspaper clipping, etc.
2. Ask if there is any other information or answers the legislator would like.
3. Ask the legislator how else he or she might help you (they might have a way to help that you might not have considered).
4. At the end of the meeting verbally review what you agreed to do for the legislator and what the legislator agreed to do for you.
5. After the meeting, be sure to get the legislator what you promised in a timely manner.

## ***Tips for Advocates***

Whatever method you use to contact your legislators or the Governor - in person, by letter, or by phone - always remember the following:

- TELL THEM WHO YOU ARE**  
...and if applicable, which organization you represent. If you live in their district, identify yourself as a constituent.
- TELL THEM WHY YOU ARE CONTACTING THEM**  
...which specific issue or bill you are calling them about. Remember that legislators and their staff are reading through literally hundreds of bills - know your bill numbers or make very specific reference to your issue.
- MAKE YOUR CASE**  
...But be concise. Statistics and fact are helpful, but personal stories make a unique impact. Always be polite. Don't say anything that would prevent that person from wanting to speak or hear from you again. As one lobbyist says, "You can disagree without being disagreeable."
- BE SPECIFIC ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO DO**  
...Refer to specific bill numbers. Ask for a "no" or "yes" vote; simply asking for their "support" is not sufficient.
- DON'T FORGET TO THANK THEM FOR THEIR TIME & CONSIDERATION!**
- WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR LEGISLATORS** (in order of effectiveness)
  1. Personal Visits
  2. Personal Letters
  3. Phone Calls Made Directly to their Offices
  4. Phone Call Made to the Legislative Hotline
  5. Postcards or Letters That Are Part of a Letters Campaign (unless there is sufficient volume)
- MAKING PHONE CALLS**  
If at all possible, call your legislator's office directly.  
  
If you cannot speak to your legislator, talk with their legislative aides - they are very influential!
- WRITING LETTERS**

Keep the body of your letters short. You can always attach articles, fact sheets, studies, etc.

Organizations will often launch postcard/letter campaigns. These can be creative and effective efforts, but only if there is great volume. The best method continues to be letters in your own words, based on your experiences.

Make sure that your letter will still be timely when it arrives in your state capital. If urgent action is an issue, a phone call is your better option.

Always include your address and phone number on your letter or postcard.

**PERSONAL VISITS**

The best time to visit your legislators and to cultivate a relationship is before session even starts.

If you can visit your legislator during session, call their aide to set up an appointment. For appointment during lobby days, call early - they tend to fill up quickly!

## *Developing Effective Messages*

If you can come up with the answers to these five questions, you are well on your way to coming up with a message that is succinct, clear, and compelling.

### **WHO ARE YOU?**

- Name and address
- Do you live in the legislator's district? Are you a constituent?
- Are you affiliated with an organization? How many members? Statewide? Regional?

### **WHAT IS YOUR ISSUE?**

- Be prepared to describe your issue and don't be surprised if your legislator is unfamiliar with it - legislators have their policy plates full of everything from salmon to roads to child care to prisons.
- Be prepared to describe your issue briefly and plainly (no more than two sentences) - don't bombard them initially with the details.

### **WHY SHOULD I CARE?**

- Why should your listener care?
- What's happening in their district, their community?

### **WHAT DO YOU SPECIFICALLY WANT ME TO DO ABOUT IT?**

- Always have a clear call to action
- Always ask for an outcome, follow-up
- Be specific in your request - don't ask for "support" ask for a "yes" or a "no" vote. Ask that they help get a bill heard in committee or brought up for a vote.
- Sometimes, the best action you can hope for is keeping the dialogue open - ask if they would be willing to read some supporting materials and then get a follow up phone call from you.

*Now it's your turn...*

**WHO ARE YOU?**

(Assume, for the purposes of this exercise, that you are speaking to your own legislators)

**WHAT IS YOUR ISSUE?**

**WHY DO YOU CARE?**

**WHY SHOULD I CARE?**

**WHAT DO YOU  
SPECIFICALLY WANT  
ME TO DO ABOUT IT?**

## ***6 Reasons for Trying Even When Your Elected Officials Seem “Hopeless”***

Here's a familiar line: "My representatives won't listen to me no matter what I say. They believe the opposite of everything I believe. I'd be wasting my time talking to them." Familiar yes, but wrong.

While it is true that successful political movements work with traditional allies and "swing votes" in the political middle, good advocacy is about winning over (or neutralizing) the opposition. Here are 6 reasons for approaching elected officials who oppose your view.

### ***...conveying your position is basic to good advocacy.***

As citizens and voters, our job is to ask them to vote a particular way (and explain our reasons why); their job is to be asked. They can't represent you (your issue, your group) unless you tell them how you wish to be represented. That's basic.

### ***...good advocacy shows that opposition is based on more than emotion.***

It is easy to dismiss someone who has never spelled out their position as a "bleeding heart" or "all emotion no brain." A well-articulated position is harder to ignore. Besides, making your case to elected officials is good practice, because they often reflect the views of their voters people you also have to win over.

### ***...they and their colleagues respect constituent pressure.***

If and when you DO win your legislators over to your side, they'll need to be able to say their constituencies pressed them to do it.

### ***...even with opponents, good advocacy is a way to educate and build relationships.***

Legislators take positions in part based on what they believe their constituents want and value. Your letters, telephone calls, and visits inform your elected representatives about your issues, while also conveying that there is strong support for your position. Never give any elected official the right to say, "I never heard anyone support XXX; I'm just reflecting what my constituents want. "

### ***...people and minds change.***

Even the most apparently immovable legislators have been known to change their position on issues particularly when the voters back home make clear they, want a change. Twenty-five years ago almost nobody in public office was pro-choice, pro-diversity, or anti-tobacco. Today, a strong majority of elected officials are. They didn't change by accident, and didn't change overnight; the persistent work of good advocates was key.

### ***...never give up.***

We have to be a presence. Elected officials should NOT be allowed to cast votes affecting children, families, and other vulnerable people without ever having to face them or their advocates. They need to know that someone is watching, and that someone is us.