



# Meeting with Your Legislator

**RELAX:** You are about to embark upon one of the most basic activities of our system of government: a dialogue with your elected representative. And while you bring neither meal tickets nor gifts, you nonetheless represent a constituency wielding a most valuable legislative commodity: *VOTES*. You understand the issues you are presenting. You have information your legislators need to hear and understand. You are responsible for setting the tone of the relationship.

**BE ASSERTIVE:** Remain calm, confident and polite throughout your visit, but don't be timid or silent. Tell them what you want and why it's important to you and those you represent. You are not interrupting them. Be courteous, but **DO NOT BE INTIMIDATED**. *They*, after all, work for *you*.

**BE ON TIME:** Your legislator will probably be late. Expect that. Their schedules are incredibly full; they often are overbooked. But you should be prompt & prepared.

**STRATEGIZE:** Before you meet with your legislator, develop a game plan with those in your group.

- **Know the agenda:** Which issues will be brought up, by whom, and in what order?
- **Plan for everyone** in your group to participate.
- **Know your arguments:** There are different ways to justify a policy position. Think about the best way to craft your message. What is important to the legislator? How can you best appeal to them?
- **Know their arguments:** You can often predict likely counterpoints. Plan responses in advance.
- **Is someone in your group from the legislator's jurisdiction?** Identify yourself and use that to your advantage: *legislators think locally*.
- **Have the specifics available:** To what precisely do you want your legislator to commit? Why?

**DURING THE MEETING:** Like any good story, a meeting with your legislator has three main parts: an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion.

- I. **Introduction:** Introduce yourself and the agency/individuals you represent. File yourself in your legislator's mind not as just another "concerned citizen," but as someone who represents a number of voters from her district. You are someone who can hinder or help your legislator. Come across as one who wants to be helpful.
- II. **Presentation of Issues:** Allow time for each of the issues you wish to discuss. Keep control of the agenda. Don't be rude, but gently guide your legislator back to the issues at hand if the conversation veers off course.
- III. **Conclusion:** Seek specific commitments or actions from your legislator. This might include co-sponsoring a bill, helping to pass or defeat certain legislation or some other action on behalf of those you represent.

## HOW DO I RESPOND?

### What if my legislator agrees **STRONGLY** with my position?

- Thank her
- Ask her to take a leadership role on the issue
- Ask her for names of others with whom you should speak

### What if my legislator agrees with me?

- Thank him
- Ask him if he would be willing to help move certain bills through the legislature

### What if my legislator is undecided?

- Present your argument as clearly and concisely as possible
- Determine the nature of her reservations and get back to her with additional information
- Don't press her further
- Arrange to have someone get back to her

### What if my legislator is opposed?

- Determine the nature of his concerns and the strength of his opposition
- Politely address his concerns – but don't spend too much time trying to move the immovable
- Thank him for his time

### What if my legislator does not indicate their position?

- Do not assume you know their position based on party affiliation
- Ask directly if they would support your position
- Acknowledge that staff may not be able to speak for the legislator but ask if you can follow up with the staff to determine the legislator's position

## REMINDERS

- ✓ **Keep track of responses.** Assign one person to record the legislator's responses and commitments.
- ✓ **Tell the truth:** Don't give false or misleading information to a legislator. If you don't know, tell them you'll get the information and get back in touch.
- ✓ **Follow-up:** If you tell your legislator you'll get back in touch, be sure you do so. Send a note the week following your visit, thanking your legislator for meeting with you.
- ✓ **Don't burn bridges:** No matter the outcome, leave the meeting on good terms with your legislator. Even if you disagree with your legislator on this issue, she may support you on another matter in the future.
- ✓ **Tell real-life stories:** Employees of HCH programs typically have real-life anecdotes that powerfully illustrate the importance of specific legislation to the daily lives of real people. Use those stories.
- ✓ **Don't be disappointed if you talk to an aide:** Many times, your legislator might not be available and you may talk to an aide or legislative assistant. Don't be discouraged or dismiss this as unimportant. Often an aide or assistant has a direct line to the legislator and can wield a great deal of influence. Make friends with the legislator's staff members. They can be your greatest allies.
- ✓ **Build long-term relationships:** Some of the most effective relationships with your legislator are those cultivated over time. Seek to communicate with your legislator many times throughout the year.
- ✓ **BE POSITIVE: ENJOY YOUR TIME!**