



Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities

The Pro-Life Secretariat's Guide to Meeting with Members of Congress

Members of Congress hear from many people from all walks of life in their states and in Washington every day. Establishing a relationship with your Member of Congress is key to ensuring that YOUR perspective is taken into consideration, especially ahead of an important vote. Even if you rarely agree with your Member of Congress, your representative should have the benefit of knowing where you stand.

Below are several things to keep in mind as you make contact with a Capitol Hill office. While this sheet lays out the process for an in-person meeting, the same principles apply to a phone call to a congressional office, or any other communication.

Requesting a Meeting

Identify your members. Your members of Congress are elected to represent YOU and they take constituents' opinions seriously. After all, you have the power to boot them from office! Most congressional offices keep track of all constituent phone calls, emails, and visits. On the other hand, members of Congress who do not represent your district do not have that incentive to take your opinion into consideration. Go to <http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/> to identify your representative.

Determine the Process: The process of scheduling a meeting in an office is different for each member of Congress. To determine the process for a particular representative, call the main telephone line of the Washington office to inquire, or visit the member's website for a full description of how to schedule an appointment. You can find the telephone number on the member's website, or you can call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121. Remember, you can request a meeting with representatives when they are at their home state office, as well. This might be easier for you.

Include Relevant Information: When you submit a request, include the relevant "who", "what", "when", "where", and good contact information for yourself. A complete request would explain that you are a constituent from the member's district who would like to discuss X issue on X dates in X location with the member of Congress or the appropriate member of their staff. You might even identify yourself as a person representing your local parish. As with other professional meeting requests, try to provide several weeks advance notice of the request when possible. Lastly, include a complete list of meeting attendees (for example, you may be planning to bring fellow members of your parish Respect Life committee).

Planning your group: A group of three or four is ideal, as it offers everyone enough time to speak and is not overwhelming. Capitol Hill offices are small, and a smaller group will enable

you to sit and speak more comfortably. In each small group, one person should be the spokesperson—ideally a constituent of the Congressman you are visiting. This spokesperson will be in charge of giving the “ask” and answering questions during the meeting as well as following up afterward.

State vs. DC Offices: Each member of Congress maintains one office in Washington, DC, and one or more offices in their respective states. You can meet in the DC office if you are in Washington, but a meeting with a state office is effective as well, especially if you can bring fellow local advocates. If you meet in a state office, make sure the state staff member shares your information with the appropriate legislative assistant in DC, and ask if you can follow-up directly with the DC staff member after your meeting. Some members of Congress host “town halls” in their district, where many constituents and local media can attend and use the opportunity to ask questions.

Some DC offices host a weekly constituent coffee where individuals can briefly meet and take pictures with the member of Congress. You may consider participating in the constituent coffee in addition to a separate meeting. A scheduled meeting would provide an opportunity to share your concerns with your representative, but coffees do not.

Staff: Representatives and senators are extremely limited in their time, so you are more likely to meet with a member of their staff. If you do, be sure you are meeting with the appropriate staff member. For religious liberty issues, you may meet with the judiciary staffer, and for pro-life issues, you may meet with the health care staff member. Tell the scheduler when you call that you wish to talk to the representative about X topic and need to speak to the appropriate member of the staff. Regardless of the issue area, you want to meet with a *legislative assistant* (LA) instead of legislative correspondent (LC) when possible, as the “LA” is the staff member primarily responsible for advising the member on that particular issue. An LC typically serves as an assistant to the LA.

Before the Meeting

Know your “ask”. What exactly do you want them to do?: The Pro-Life Secretariat will often send you information about legislative priorities. But you don’t need to wait for us—you can advocate on your own about issues you care about. Is there a bill you support, and do you want your member of Congress to cosponsor it? You may decide you want your representative to join a group like the Congressional Pro-Life Caucus or the International Religious Freedom Caucus. The important thing is to have a specific request—a bill to cosponsor, a bill you want them to vote for or against, etc.

Know Your Member(s): As with any meeting, know your audience. Research your representative’s history as it relates to your “ask”. Have they already cosponsored the legislation or otherwise completed your “ask”? You can look up any bill at Congress.gov and see if the representative has cosponsored it. If they have, you should say “thank you!” as it is important that she knows you support her efforts. More broadly, be sure you understand your representatives’ views on abortion, religious freedom or whatever issue you may be discussing. Check their social media pages on Facebook and Twitter to learn about the members’ recent

comments and priorities. Even if you strongly disagree on the issue you're discussing, try to see if there is a small point of agreement in another area.

Know Your Issue(s): The Pro-Life Secretariat strives to keep advocates updated through email. We also share talking points on a particular policy issue when relevant. Use our provided information in addition to your other news and advocacy resources as you prepare for meetings with congressional offices. If you are uncertain about a particular aspect, do not hesitate to reach out to us with questions. You should be prepared for potentially difficult questions that advocates on the OTHER side may have posed to the representative. In these situations, you can use this opportunity to help the representative deal with those who want him or her to do the wrong thing.

Finalize the pitch for your "ask": Take some time to develop your main talking points, which should be brief and to the point. Why is this legislation important to you? How will it positively impact people in your community? You don't need to talk for a long time, just explain simply how their support on your issue will help you, your family, or the women and kids in your town.

Conducting the Meeting

Time: A meeting is typically limited to 30 minutes or less. Use the first few minutes to share information about yourself and provide background information about why you're there (the staff member is likely not familiar with your group). Next, use about 10 minutes to walk the staff member through your talking points on a particular issue of concern, and reserve the last 10 minutes of the meeting for the staff member to share the representative's perspective on the issue, and ask any questions. Make sure you leave enough time to hear from the staff member so that you know where your representative is standing on your issue(s).

Be adaptable: Be understanding of the circumstances of your visit, like speaking with a staffer as opposed to a Congressman, meeting in the hall, etc. Congressmen are always overscheduled, and Hill offices are notoriously tiny and understaffed. It is not a mark of disrespect that you are suddenly meeting with a staffer instead of the Congresswoman—even if you scheduled months in advance, the Congresswoman may have a vote or another unavoidable obligation. This does NOT mean they do not take you or your request seriously. Likewise, Hill offices are often small spaces and sometimes meeting in the hallway or a cafeteria is the only option that staffers have. Try to remain adaptable, but if you have special requirements, like wheelchair accessibility, let them know ahead of time.

Be courteous: Always, always be courteous in every interaction, even on the phone or on social media. Most offices keep track of every constituent communication, so if you yell, curse, lie, or make a personal attack, there will be a permanent documentation of it. Even if you disagree with their views, being consistently respectful will get you greater respect and help them want to help you where they can.

Establish a Relationship: The goal of your meeting is to establish a relationship with the staff member and the member of Congress so that you can continue to influence both individuals in the future. This relationship is a delicate balance of holding the representative accountable while also offering support in areas of mutual interest.

Follow-up

Staff Contacts: If the staff member requests any follow-up information in the meeting, be sure to provide it in a timely fashion. Send a thank you email after your meeting with your contact information so that the staff member can contact you easily in the future. If you met with a state office, follow up with the DC staff member.

Social Media: Consider thanking the congressional office on social media if appropriate. “Like” and “follow” the representative on Facebook and Twitter so that you can continue to track their work in Washington. Sign up for the member’s e-newsletter.

Sharing the Outcome of the Meeting with Others: You may also want to share a recap of the meeting with other individuals in your community and send the representative’s office information about your reporting. It could lead to others becoming more involved and the office taking more of an interest in the future. Remember, the more pro-lifers from your district who make their views known, the better for your cause.

In-State Events: Ask the staff member to add your name to the list of in-state events for your area. That way, if the member of Congress is in town, you can participate in any ongoing discussions or offer support at appropriate events.

Checking In: Try to find a reason to reach out to the staff member or congressional office every 6 months to a year. Ongoing contact demonstrates your strong support for an issue and ensures that the staff member will remember you if you reach out ahead of a critical vote.

Personal Testimony & Hearings

When debating policy in Congress, members and committees frequently need personal testimony from individuals affected by a particular issue. Constituents can be asked to serve as a witness on a hearing panel, or personal testimony can be submitted into the Congressional record of the committee. If you have a personal story that’s of interest or would be a good candidate for a hearing panel, make sure your representative’s office or the relevant committees are aware.

REMEMBER

YOU DO NOT NEED TO BE PERFECT TO BE EFFECTIVE. Simply expressing your views consistently and politely can help change the world!