In-District Lobbying Guide

You don't have to come to Washington to tell your Members of Congress what you think – you can schedule lobby visits with them in the district. (As non-profit organizations, victim services providers can lobby Congress within certain simple limitations. For more information, see the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) "Lobbying and Non-Profit Status" fact sheet.

When can you meet with your Members of Congress in the district?

Most Members of Congress are at home on Fridays, Mondays and during the weekend. (They are in Washington Tuesday through Thursday.)

Members are also at home working during weeks when Congress is in "recess."

Three Simple Steps to Schedule a Meeting or Event

You can schedule a meeting with your Members of Congress or their staff in their district office. You could also invite your Members of Congress to an event that your organization is planning or invite them to tour your program and learn more about your services. There are three steps to schedule a meeting or event with your Members of Congress.

1. Contact the Scheduler. Members of Congress have staff dedicated to managing their schedules both while they are in Washington and at home in their district. To schedule a meeting or event, contact their district office and ask to speak with the Scheduler who is responsible for their schedule while they are in the district (this person may be in the district office or a Scheduler in their DC office staff may handle all events). To get information on how to contact their district offices, go to www.senate.gov or www.house.gov and find your Member's personal web site. Or, you can contact their DC office through the Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121.

2. Email or fax a scheduling request letter. Most Congressional offices will request a short letter addressed to the Scheduler that states the purpose of the meeting, the proposed dates and times, and the individuals who want to attend. If you are inviting the Member to an event or to tour your program, give details about the invitation and explain that you would be honored to have the Member attend or visit. Mention that it would be a great press opportunity for your Member. Include that you have the most up-to-date information on domestic violence in the state, and wish to share the information with your Member. Make sure to include your contact information so that the Scheduler can get back to you.

3. Follow-up and confirm the meeting details. After you send your letter, make a phone call to the Scheduler to follow-up. They will help arrange the details and ensure that your Member of Congress has all the information that they need to prepare. It may take several phone calls before you hear a response and sometimes they will not be able to give an answer immediately. Be patient and offer to call again closer to the event or desired meeting date.

If you need help scheduling or preparing for a meeting with your Members of Congress you can contact your state domestic violence coalition. The coalitions can help you coordinate your lobbying efforts with other local programs and advocates, and representatives from the coalition may be able to join you for an in-district meeting.

Make the Most of your Meeting

Whether you attend a meeting at their office or they tour your local shelter, the amount of time that you have with your Member of Congress will be limited, usually only 15 to 30 minutes, so you want to be prepared to make the most of this time! The following steps will help you have a successful meeting.

- ☑ **Bring a group!** The purpose of your lobby visit is to help your Member of Congress understand the positive impact federal legislation and funding has on local programs. If possible, organize a group of community partners that can describe the role that this funding and legislation plays in their work or the impact that they have seen it have in the community. Possible attendees could include members of law enforcement, nurses or other medical providers, teachers, faith leaders, or survivors. Keep the group small (no more than 4-5 people) and plan ahead so that everyone understands the focus of the meeting and is prepared to contribute to the discussion.

- ☑ **Thank your Member of Congress for their support for victims of domestic and sexual violence.** If you know that they have taken steps to support victims in the past, be sure to thank them for their actions. This is a good way to start the meeting off positively and will show them that you appreciate their efforts.

- ☑ **Tell your story and make your case.** Meeting with your Member of Congress is an opportunity to tell your story. Whether you are asking for programmatic changes or increased funding, be prepared to make your case. Prepare personal stories and anecdotes to share, as well as statistics from your community that illustrate the unmet need and why domestic violence services are critical.

- ☑ **Bring materials to back up your request** such as a copy of the 2010 Census with your State Census Summary, materials about your program, stories and statistics from your community, and your business card. You should also include a written letter asking for their support.

- ☑ **Ask for a commitment.** Your goal is to enlist your Member of Congress's support, so be as specific as you can. If there is a specific action you would like them to take, ask the direct question.

- ☑ **Thank them for meeting and follow-up promptly.** Be sure to thank your Member for taking time to talk with you and let them know that you appreciate their work to help victims. Promptly following the meeting send a written thank-you note. Follow-up with their staff to let them know what action they can take. Also, be sure to include any information or materials that you promised during the meeting.

- ☑ **If you meet with Congressional staff, be respectful and do not be discouraged.** Members of Congress depend on their staff to help them follow the numerous issues that are important to the communities that they represent. Congressional staff are often the most knowledgeable on your issues and they have substantial influence over your Members of Congress. Regardless of their title or age, they are responsible for helping the Member make policy decisions and can be very important allies in helping victims. Treat them with respect and work hard to build a positive relationship!

Little Ocean, Big Splash. You can meet with District Office staff even when the Member is in DC. You can also invite Congressional staff to visit your program! Though it may not be as exciting or high profile, an in-person visit can build their relationship with your program and their understanding of victim services.

A few things to remember…

- *Make it personal and district-specific. Tell the Member how your concerns about funding impact real victims and families in your community.*
- *Stay on the subject. Most Members of Congress have the "gift of gab" and will (intentionally and unintentionally) tend to divert you from your topic to something they know more about, or hold forth at great length about their own pet issues. Don't stray, and don't let them evade or change the subject. Be polite, but firmly stick to the topic you want to discuss.*
- *Don't get frustrated or flustered. Legislators may make critical or uninformed remarks about domestic and sexual violence or your organization and the services you provide. Do not let this frustrate you or become defensive; instead, focus on how important the federal legislation is for your programs. Emphasize why their support is so important. They may ask tough questions. If you don't know, tell them you will get back to them.*
- *Be honest and keep your word. Never promise anything you cannot deliver. Never lie or mislead a Member of Congress about the relative importance of an issue, the statistics you are providing, or any other matter.*

Events and Visits: Handle with Care

Roll out the red carpet. If a Member of Congress attends an event or visits your program, be prepared to lavish them with attention and ensure that they receive attention from the press or other attendees. Greet them upon arrival and introduce them to other VIPs such as your board members or important supporters who can thank them for attending.

Give them an opportunity to get in front of a microphone and speak. Most Senators and Representatives will want to share their thoughts about why they are there and talk about what they have done to help victims. You can discuss with their Scheduler beforehand. Try to get the Member of Congress to the microphone quickly—they may not have time to wait for other speakers. Check in with their staff about how much time they have available.

Record the moment. Invite press to cover the event or accompany the Member on a tour of the program. Take a photo of the Member during their visit. If press does not attend, you can share the photo with an accompanying press release with your local media. Be sure to send the Member's staff a copy of the photo and the press release. A photo with a Member of Congress is always a great addition to your web site, newsletter, or fundraising appeal.

What else can you do?

The most successful lobbying involves personal and direct contact with your Member of Congress through in-person meetings or events. But, here are some examples of other effective lobbying strategies that you can use.

- Call your Member of Congress in their Washington office and ask to speak with your Member's staffer who works on domestic violence issues. Mention that you are a constituent (if you are) and give your name, address and organizational affiliation. Tell them why you are calling. Be brief and specific. Offer to be a resource and provide more information about the needs in your community.
- Write your Member of Congress a personal letter. Be sure to personalize it with examples from your programs or community. It is best to both mail the letter and send a copy via fax (you can find their DC office fax number on their web site) because security precautions can delay Congressional mail by several weeks.
- Email your Member of Congress as an alternative to writing a letter. This may be less effective than writing a letter by mail, but is a good alternative if you are short on time. Make the email as personal as possible.

- **Mobilize survivors or community members to write Congress.** Ask survivors, board members, volunteers or other community members to write Congress. Even postcards with a few sentences about why victim services are important can make a big impact. If possible, collect these postcards or letters yourself and mail or hand-deliver them to your Member's district office to ensure that they are received.

- **Write a letter to the editor or an op-ed** to raise awareness about the critical need for services and the role that federal legislation and funding plays in providing those services in your community. Publishing an editorial or op-ed is an opportunity to educate members of your community and enlist them as allies in calling on Congress to increase funding. Be sure to give credit to your Member of Congress by mentioning them in your letter/article if they have previously supported domestic violence programs.

- **Mobilize the media.** Plan a town hall meeting, send out a press release or a media advisory, or pay for a newspaper advertisement. Again, the key is to raise awareness and get others involved!

Long-Term Strategies

Congressional support is critical to securing funding increases and reauthorization of major legislation. This means that we need to focus on building long-term relationships with them.

The District Office

While they are in Washington, Members of Congress have staff working in their District Offices.

Good to have on your side. Many District Offices have caseworkers or staff that are dedicated to helping constituents navigate federal programs. Sometimes they are also connected to state and local government agencies and can help with issues at or between these levels. They are good allies to have when you and your agency are dealing with challenges or helping clients navigate systems.

Good to know. Members often have special district aides who are staff that they trust to represent them at district events. District aides can be very strategic allies because they are often well-connected in the community and have the Members' ears.

Good to contact. Usually the District Office reports to the DC office about what issues or legislative priorities they are hearing about from constituents. If a District Office receives 10 phone calls or 5 letters about an issue, this may stand out more than 20 phone calls or 10 letters about the same issue if they went to the DC office.

- **Join an action list** of a national domestic violence, sexual assault or crime victims' advocacy organization! This will help you to stay on top of issues, learn about strategic times to lobby, and get useful materials.

- **Get to know legislators well.** It helps to pay attention to who your Members of Congress are and what issues are important to them. You can research their interests, districts, legislative priorities, voting records and more on their web sites. This will help you build rapport and enlist their support for victims' services by connecting it to issues that they care about.

- **Build coalitions** with other individuals and organizations. Legislators will pay more attention to an issue when you represent more than one vote. Remember there is strength in numbers!

- **Always say, "Thank you!"** Be sure to keep in touch with your Members of Congress and their staff and always thank them for the work that they do for victims. It is important for them to know that you are paying attention. This will make them want to help you again in the future.