

Top Ten Tips for Meeting with Your Members of Congress and Their Staff

Meeting with Members of Congress and/or their staff is a terrific way for Prevent Blindness America to communicate with policymakers on important issues. Through these visits, you can educate Congress about your concerns, make yourself available as a resource, and establish a relationship that can prove mutually beneficial over time. It is best to build a relationship before you need it – such meetings can be conducted at Congressional offices in Washington, DC, or “at home” in district offices, and can result in support for Prevent Blindness America’s public policy priorities.

Top Ten Tips:

1. **Prepare and be on time.** Members of Congress and their staff are very busy. Be respectful of their time. Give yourself plenty of time to go through security, find your way to the office, and announce yourself to the receptionist. If you will be in a group, discuss with your colleagues in advance what you will be covering in the meeting. Be sure to select a primary spokesperson and determine who in the group will raise which points and requests.

Open the meeting by thanking the Member/staffer for his or her time. Be sure that everyone in the group identifies him/herself – first and last name and the fact that you are representing Prevent Blindness America – and remember to mention where you live/work in the district/state, so they are clear you are a constituent. If the policymaker/staffer has been helpful in the past, or has taken action that you appreciate, be sure to say thank you and acknowledge this up front. Prior to your meeting with the Member/staffer, it is best to get a sense of what issues currently are pending before Congress and the committee(s) on which the Member sits and what the Member’s position has been on various health care issues. This type of information can be found at <http://thomas.loc.gov>.

2. **Be brief and clear**, as you typically will have only 10–25 minutes for the entire meeting. Often you will meet with the Health Legislative Assistant (HLA). This person is charged with making health policy decisions and recommendations to the Member of Congress. Cover only a few (one to three) topics. You will have talking points in advance to ensure that you and your colleagues “stay on message.” Anticipate the kinds of questions you may be asked from both supporters and opponents, and be prepared to answer such questions in the meeting. If asked a question to which you do not know the answer, acknowledge that the question is a good one, and indicate you will follow up later with the answer. Do not assume that the Member/staffer is knowledgeable about the issue you are discussing; be sure to provide some background information. Explain that you want to provide your perspective on an issue of importance to you, and/or your community. Be sure not to use any “lingo” or “slang” (e.g. do not use acronyms in your speech like “VHI” when you mean the Vision Health Initiative) – unless you have first explained what it means.
3. **Be sure to provide a personal story or real-life illustration**, since personal stories are more easily remembered than statistics. As necessary, briefly cite evidence or statistics to support your position, particularly any local, regional, or state data. You will have this information in your packet, and a copy will be in the packet you will leave behind with the office, as well. However, be careful not to overwhelm the policymaker/staffer with too many statistics or references to studies this kind of information will be in the materials you leave behind, or can be sent with your thank-you note). Also, keep your personal story brief. Discuss how the policy change (e.g., enactment of the Vision Care for Kids Act of 2009) will have an impact on your community. Be concise and honest about the issue(s) and the solution(s), and make clear the relevance of the issue(s) to their constituents.

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4. **Be polite and listen carefully** to the policymaker's/staffer's views and comments. Even if you disagree, it is very important to be courteous. Be flexible, consider the opposing view, and avoid being argumentative or threatening. You may agree to disagree on an issue now and find that you can agree and work together on another matter in the future. Much of advocacy is about building and maintaining relationships over time. Being respectful, providing reliable information, and making a compelling case has helped us win over some terrific champions.
5. **Be sure to get a response – respectfully.** Ask directly and politely for the policymaker's views and position on the issue and what he/she plans to do about it. The policymaker/staffer may distract you with other issues, such as by making a broad statement like, "I voted in the past to double the funding of the National Institutes of Health." Stay on message and on topic as politely as possible, and be sure to make your "ask." It is your constitutional right to meet with your Congressional representatives, so take this opportunity to do what you can to get a commitment from the Member of Congress to take action on your request(s). However, if the Member truly is undecided, or the staffer is not familiar with the Member's position on the issue, do not force the issue. Reiterate your interest, offer to answer any questions or provide additional information, and request a written follow-up letter from the Member, once a decision has been made.
6. **Bring a short set of materials with you to leave behind.** However, do not give the materials to the Member/staffer until the close of the meeting, or he/she may be distracted by the material and only listen to you with one ear. Early in the meeting indicate that you have materials to leave behind. Be sure to follow up, and follow through on any promises of additional information.
7. **Leave your contact information.** If you leave a business card, make it clear that you are visiting on your own time and not representing your employer, unless you have received such clearance. If you do not have a business card to leave, make sure you give your home/personal contact information, so the office can follow-up. Be sure to get a business card from the Member of Congress/staffer, so that you know how to reach him/her. Be sure to ask the Member/staffer their preferred mode of communication (e.g., e-mail, fax, or voice-mail/phone).
8. **Summarize your requests of the Member of Congress** and any responses the Member/staffer has provided to ensure that you are clear on where they stand on the issues. Summarize the Member's/staffer's requests, and indicate how you plan to respond. Express thanks and appreciation for their time, interest, and courtesy.
9. **Report back to Prevent Blindness America** any meeting with your Members of Congress or their staff. This information is essential for Prevent Blindness America to have so that others can follow up with the office to provide additional information, if needed, and reinforce the message you delivered.
10. **Follow up with a thank you note.** This letter should be addressed to the Member of Congress whose office(s) you visited with a cc: to the staffer with whom you met (*as applicable*), referencing the date of your meeting, who was in attendance, and the issues you discussed. Your follow-up letter should express appreciation for the time and consideration extended to you during your meeting. Prevent Blindness America has provided a sample letter for your reference when preparing your personalized thank you. Make sure you reiterate your request(s) and ask for a written response from the office. Call/e-mail/write with answers or information the Member/staffer requested of you. Keep in touch with the Member/staffer to maintain and strengthen your relationship. Great ways to keep in touch include sending an article of interest from the local paper, mailing a copy of the latest ***Prevent Blindness America News***, or inviting the Member/staffer to visit your facility (*if applicable*) at home, when they next are visiting. *If your initial meeting is in Washington, D.C., be sure to schedule a similar meeting with the staff in the district or state office.*

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Check in with your policymaker when s/he is at home to reinforce the relationship, and follow up on your issues of priority.

Other tips

When visiting Capitol Hill, you could encounter long lines to get through security (bags and all contents from your pockets must be put through x-ray machines, and you must step through a metal detector). Please allow plenty of time to get through security and ensure that you leave any possibly contentious items (pocket knives, tools, etc) at home.

The Congressional schedule is very fluid, and Members of Congress and staffers are often pulled away for last-minute, unplanned activities that are not known in advance. As such, your meeting could be delayed or bumped or you may meet with a different person than expected. Also, space on Capitol Hill is at a premium, so your meeting could take place in the office reception area, in the hallway or downstairs in the coffee shop. Do not take any last minute meeting changes personally, and make sure you are always gracious and flexible.

You can reach your Members of Congress in the following ways:

- ✓ Phone through the U.S. Capitol switchboard at 202.224.3121
- ✓ E-mail your U.S. Representative through: <http://www.house.gov/writerep>
- ✓ E-mail both of your two U.S. Senators by looking up their contact information through: <http://www.senate.gov>

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