

How to Speak to Policymakers

Prepare in Advance:

- *Do Your Homework:* Policymakers are busy people, so doing your homework before meeting with them is essential. Make sure that you are making good use of their time. Where do they stand on the issues? Are they likely to support, or oppose, your proposal? Where do their constituents stand on the issue, and how do you know that? Be sure to prepare for any questions they may have with relevant and compelling facts and stories.

- *Timing Is Everything:* What else is on their agenda that is competing for their attention? Do they have other priorities right now? What is the optimal time to meet with them? Are they looking for a winning proposal to champion? Are they in a play-it-safe mode because they're up for re-election, or are they willing to take a risk because they are term-limited and leaving office soon?

- *Get To Know Their Staff:* Policymakers' staff members can be your biggest allies and can give you feedback on effective scheduling and messaging for that policymaker.

- *Consider The Messenger:* Policymakers want to hear from real people who are impacted by the issues, so bring someone knowledgeable who can support you and offer a diverse perspective.

Know Your Audience:

- *Think About What They Value:* This includes the health and safety of their constituents, but also the health of local businesses, jobs in the community and (frankly) getting re-elected.

- *Focus On Impact:* Talk about how your proposal will impact their constituents. If possible, show that their constituents support your proposal. You can bring a constituent, survey results or constituent testimonials.

- *Talk About How What You're Doing Matters:* Tell stories about real people to illustrate your point. Don't rely purely on data.

- *Don't Overestimate Their Knowledge Or Interest In Your Issue:* Policymakers are faced with a lot of issues on a daily basis, so make sure you have information that cuts through the clutter.

While You Are There:

- *Be Prepared To Wait:* You may even have to meet with staff instead of the policymaker.
- *Stick To Your Message:* Think about the two to three things you want them to know and remember, then think about some ways you can talk about or illustrate those points.
- *Answer Their Questions:* Hopefully you will have thought about what questions you might get asked and know how you'll answer. However, if you are asked something you're unprepared for, say you'll find out and get back to them – then be sure to do it.
- *Determine The Desired Outcome:* Picture the best-case outcome, then try to “sell” that.
- *Leave Something Behind:* Leave a one-page fact sheet and your business card or contact information in case there are additional questions after you leave.
- *Follow Up:* Thank them and tell them you are interested in getting their feedback and continuing the conversation.

Relax:

- *Smile and appear friendly, approachable, helpful and open:* Feel free to ask questions yourself.

Remember: Board members are elected officials too and often have overlapping constituencies. Policymakers need you almost as much as you need them. You have information that is important to help them make an informed decision.

