

## Meeting with Members of Congress at their Offices

One of the best ways to advocate with Members of Congress is to meet with them. There are several reasons to meet, including explaining your issues and convincing them of the moral rightness of your position; but the primary reason is to demonstrate political support for your position. As people of faith, we frequently think we should be able to change people's opinion because of the rightness of our cause. Perhaps we should, but politicians often care more about getting reelected than about the details of issues. Despite how cynical this sounds, it is important to keep the political dimensions in mind as you prepare for and hold your meeting.

Below are some guidelines for planning, conducting, and following-up a meeting with a Member of Congress at his or her office. You can expect that your Members of Congress will be in the district around President's Day, Easter, Memorial Day, July 4<sup>th</sup>, most of August through Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. During an election year, they seek to adjourn by early October.

### Planning Your Meeting

- **Contact the Member of Congress' office** to schedule a time and date to meet. Feel free to do this even before you've figured out who will go. Tell the Member that you will have 10-15 religious leaders present. Sometimes the local office staff arranges the schedule. Other times, the Washington D.C. scheduler arranges it. Be willing to be flexible about the dates and times you will meet. The U.S. Capitol Switchboard number in Washington, D.C. is (202) 224-3121. In the district, you should be able to meet with a Representative directly. Don't meet with an aide instead. For large states, you may only be able to meet with an aide to a Senator.
- **Recruit key religious leaders to participate.** Although you want some people who are knowledgeable on health care issues, your group should be composed primarily of religious leaders, representing a broad cross-section of the community. It is always helpful to have a person from the Member of Congress' local congregation or denomination, as well as some large contributors to or key volunteers for the Member of Congress' election campaign (assuming they agree with your position). If you are planning the meeting for a broad range of community groups (not just the religious community), seek community leaders who represent the diversity of the community.
- **Review the Member of Congress' record** on health care issues. Contact UHCAN to help find information about the Member's voting record on health care issues.
- **Hold a planning meeting** with as many people as possible. Decide who will facilitate the meeting, who will say what kind of things, why it is in the Member of Congress' self-interest to vote how you would like, what has been his/her health care record, what bills he or she has supported, and what specific questions will you ask the Member of Congress. The questions should be very specific, such as "Will you co-sponsor the \_\_\_\_\_ bill?" or "Will

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you work in mark-up to assure a bill that meets our principles? (You should be prepared to clarify which aspects you are concerned about.) Be prepared to respond to the politician's responses such as, "I need to study this matter more."

- **Assign one person to serve as a note taker.** Ask that person to write down exactly what the Member of Congress agrees to do. You may wish to have the note taker review what the Member of Congress has agreed to do before you close the meeting. Another useful role is a photographer. It's good to get a picture of your meeting to use in stories and updates on the campaign.

Some groups prepare a mini-agenda for the meeting. This helps everyone to stay on track.

- **Arrange to meet** 30 minutes before your scheduled meeting at a pre-arranged spot. This will give you a few minutes to make sure that everyone know their roles and is familiar with the latest updates on the health care bills.
- **Call everyone the night before** the meeting to remind them. Too many people forget to write down appointments. Call and remind everyone who has agreed to participate.

## Running Your Meeting

- **Begin the meeting** by having people introduce themselves and indicate how many people or groups they represent. Ministers may want to indicate the size of their congregations. The more people and groups you can claim to represent, the better. Politicians care about votes. Numbers of people represent potential votes.
- **Outline the agenda ahead of time.** Whoever is chairing the meeting should outline the agenda. The agenda doesn't need to be elaborate, but should help assure that you get your points covered. One or two people should present the group's basic point of view and then another person or two should be prepared to ask the Member specific questions. At the end, either the chairperson or the note taker should summarize what was agreed at the meeting.
- **Present your group's point of view** through one or two of your most knowledgeable people. Do not feel obliged to give every bit of evidence to support your position. Give the congressperson some additional handouts to avoid talking too long. Be sure to emphasize the "political" dimensions of the issue, as well as the intellectual and moral arguments. Demonstrate how this proposal would help large numbers of people in the district or state, while not adversely impacting very many people. Help make it politically "safe" for the congressperson to support your position. As you go along, do your best to answer questions the congressperson has. If you are unable to answer some, indicate that you will get back to him/her soon with a response.
- **Ask the congressperson very focused questions.** Politicians are experts at weaseling out of questions. Ask very specific questions. Will you cosponsor the bill? Will you support our principles in committee? Will you talk with your colleagues about supporting it? Will you

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sign on to a "Dear Colleague" letter indicating your support (this special letter that Members of Congress write to one another)? If the congressperson wants to think about this, ask by when a decision will be made. At the minimum, try to pin down a specific decision date.

- **Review what has been agreed to** at the meeting. It is always useful to reiterate what you have agreed to do and what the congressperson has agreed to do. Either the note taker or the chairperson can give this summary.
- **Take a picture of the meeting.** The photographer in your group should take a picture at the end, or during the meeting.

### **Following-up Your Meeting**

- **Evaluate the meeting with your group.** What worked well, what didn't? what other points should you have made? Can additional points or materials be included in the follow-up letter?
- **Send a follow-up letter.** Thank the congressperson for the meeting, reiterate what he/she has agreed to do and emphasize your primary message. Additional points and materials can be added, but don't send too much at one time.
- **Prepare a brief summary** of the meeting to send to your allies and to publish in congregation bulletins. Get this summary out within a few days after the meeting so everyone knows what happened. Be sure to include what the next steps are for lobbying the congressperson (i.e. write Congresswoman Smith thanking her for agreeing to cosponsor and vote for the bill, or write urging her to decide to cosponsor).
- **Get the pictures made of the meeting.** Have one picture enlarged and framed and send it to the congressperson to remind him/her of your meeting. Make several other small copies for press use.
- **Write a short newspaper/newsletter story** about the meeting and send it to area papers, community newsletters, denominational publications and social justice newsletters. Enclose copies of the picture to use with the story. Make sure that the story tells people what the next steps are and what specifically they should do.
- **Share what occurred with other faith-based groups.** It is critical for the religious advocates across the country to know what is happening around the country.
- **Plan your next steps.** Frequently, an initial meeting with a congressperson serves to bring the issue to his/her attention. It does not convince him/her of the political importance of your issue. Only large numbers of people expressing their concerns will convince a politician. Plan your next steps for building, mobilizing, and demonstrating your political support for the position. Letter-writing campaigns, postcards campaigns and regular appearance at all public events do help demonstrate political interest in your position.

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