

Meeting with a Legislator?

11 Tips for Starting a Great Relationship

1. Prepare in Advance

Preparation is 85% of the game with a legislator. If you wing it, legislators know it in an instant. So, line up your ducks before a meeting and know:

- What your message is;
- What each of you will say, and
- What you want the legislator to do – decide what your “ask” will be.

Also, pick a point person who will open the meeting, explain why you are there, and make sure everyone speaks.

2. Timing

Legislators are very busy juggling committee meetings, hearings, appointments, and votes on the floor. Although they may keep you waiting, you need to be on time!

If your meeting is cancelled or cut short – do not take it personally. If you see the legislator is in a rush, get your main points across quickly. If the legislator cancels, ask to meet with their legislative aide. They will bring your message to the legislator.

3. Introduce Yourself

When you start the meeting, everyone should introduce themselves. Tell the legislator how many members belong to your CDC and what kind of programs you offer to residents in your community.

4. Start the Ball Rolling

Think of your meeting as a conversation and try to have a good discussion.

- Congratulate the legislator for a recent achievement or for doing something good for your CDC;
- Recognize the legislator’s position on an issue, even if it has nothing to do with your CDC’s priorities;
- Use humor, if appropriate; and
- Be relaxed, flexible, and patient.
- Remember, legislators like to have a dialogue.

5. Get to the Heart of the Matter

Tell a legislator how a bill will hurt or help you personally. Let them know the bill affects real lives – like yours – and other residents in your community.

Be clear. Talk in short sentences. Try to paint a picture that they won’t forget.

Tell them a fact or personal story that they will remember. Share how their support could positively transform the lives of people who live and work in your neighborhood.

6. Stop or Go?

Tell the legislator exactly what you want them to do:

- Support a bill or budget item;
- Oppose a bill;
- Change the bill to make it better; and
- Talk to other elected officials about a bill.

7. Listen Carefully

Listen to what a legislator or staff person says to you.

If a legislator asks a question and you don't know the answer, write down the question. Don't worry that you can't answer it. Tell them it is a good question, and you'll get back to them with the answer.

Make sure to respond with good, reliable information. Your honesty and follow-up will go a long way to developing a good relationship. Have one person take notes and write down what the legislator agreed to.

8. Stay on Target

Sometimes legislators try to change the subject or create disagreements between groups. Don't let this happen. Stay on topic and keep your dignity.

Afraid Legislators Won't Give You the Time of Day?

Everyone has fears about meeting with a legislator. But as you attend more meetings and put these tips into action, you will become less anxious.

It's like learning to swim. You can't learn on land. You must get into the water. And after you dip your toes, it takes time and practice before you can dive!

In most meetings you will be with other people. So, you'll have support from others.

9. Leave the Door Open

If this is your first meeting with a legislator, it probably won't be your last. Don't get angry if you disagree. Be cool. Stay calm. Use the disagreement as an opportunity to:

- Ask the legislator questions, so you understand their perspective; and
- Give the legislator information (not just arguments) that may help them rethink their understanding of the issue.

Keep the lines of communication open. A legislator may not be supportive today, but things could change tomorrow.

10. Thank You

When the meeting ends, thank the legislator or staff person for their time – regardless of the results of the meeting. Be sure to get the name of the staff person before you leave. After the meeting, write a brief note to thank the legislator for meeting with you. Describe your discussion and any agreements that were reached. Everyone likes to get thank-you notes – and they don't get them often!

11. Keep an Eye on Your Elected Official

Follow how your legislator votes on our issues. Then make sure your legislator knows that you're watching. Write them short notes or call them and let them know that you appreciated or were disappointed about their vote.

Keep your elected officials accountable!