Make Your Voice Heard

Sojourners' guide to contacting—and influencing—your elected representatives.

Personal stories and meetings with constituents are among the most powerful ways to impact legislators. Whether you're a seasoned lobby veteran or a first-time advocate, your discussion with a member of Congress or their staff is essential "for such time as this."

REMEMBER: Meetings are better than phone calls; phone calls are better than e-mails; e-mails are better than social media outreach; social media outreach is better than nothing!

Setting up a meeting:

1) Look at a congressional calendar to see when your member of Congress is likely to be in your district for an in-district work period.

2) Call your local office at least two weeks before your preferred meeting date. You can find your member here.

3) Explain that you are a constituent, your particular concerns, and any group you are representing (Church, school board, non-profit, etc.)

4) Agree on a meeting time.

** Some offices have an online form to schedule an in-district meeting. These are easy and convenient. However, talking to a real person may connect you with a staff member who works directly on your issue.

Preparing for a meeting:

1) Know what you want to say and carefully review your talking points.

2) If possible, compile information about the impact of specific legislative issues on your district/state. (Do not compile a long list of statistics; your elected officials will not remember them and they will lose their impact.)

3) Prepare a few dramatic numbers or anecdotes to illustrate your points. Collect recent local news articles that illustrate the issue. Or even better, consider bringing individuals who would be affected by the policy change.

4) Most importantly, be ready to share your story and why these legislative issues have a personal impact on your life.

During a meeting:

1) Begin by introducing yourself.

2) Explain to the legislator/staffer why you asked for the meeting.

3) Present your concerns simply and directly. Get to your "bottom line" immediately. Be brief, direct, courteous and positive.

4) If you do not know the answer to a question, say so, and promise to send a follow-up email with the answer. Be sure to follow up with your answer as quickly as possible after the meeting.

5) Be sure to ask for the policy maker's support. If he or she is already very supportive, ask him or her to cosponsor the relevant bill and/or take a leadership role in moving the bill through the process, getting additional cosponsors, or other methods.

Follow up

1) Send a note thanking the member or staff person for meeting with you. Briefly summarize the main points of the meeting. Remember to follow up with responses to any questions the member or staff person asked but you could not answer at the time.

2) Thank them/acknowledge them on the member's Facebook page or Twitter handle.

3) Do not think of the meeting as an isolated event. Think of other ways to maintain the relationship.

4) Stay informed, and stay involved!

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