

Tips for Communicating with Policymakers

- 1. Build a rapport and establish relationships before you need them.** Don't call officials or their staff with an urgent plea and expect them to pay attention. If they know what you're about and why you are an important source of information to them in calm times, they will be far more likely to pay attention to you and/or your organization when you really need them. This is true with any relationship - so remember to apply it in the political process.
- 2. You have three minutes to make your case.** A meeting may go 15 minutes or an hour, but the policy maker isn't interested in a speech. They want to know: Who you are, and what they can do for you? Be prepared to explain the context of your issue, why you requested the meeting, and what you need/want from them - all in three minutes. If possible, weave a personal story into your "ask" so the policymaker can more clearly understand the issue, its context and your request. It is a good idea to link this story to any interests the policymaker may have as well. A personal story will also make the issue more "real" for the policymaker and hopefully leave a lasting impression. This is not that hard once you have practiced, and if you come prepared.
- 3. Staff matter.** Don't be disappointed if you don't meet with the elected official. Particularly at the federal level, staff members make most of the day-to-day decisions and are the ones with regular access to the Congressman or Senator. What's most important is getting your idea considered.
- 4. Be prepared to compromise.** When approaching state or local officials, Members of Congress, their staff or Executive Branch representatives, remember that they do things for reasons that go beyond good will and humanitarianism. Politics is not completely selfless. Understand where they are coming from, what their political needs are, and try to ensure that at least some of your policy objectives are met - realizing that you aren't the Czar of Policy on your issue and that others are weighing in as well.
- 5. Pay attention to the politics around your issue, and be opportunistic.** Sometimes, you have to seize the right moment, being aware of the dynamics around your issue and the possibilities that are ripe from unrelated circumstances. The Schiavo case made the end-of-life debate more urgent and relevant. Hurricane

Katrina gave license to consider a range of urban issues not on the table before the storm hit.

6. Politicians are much more accessible when home in their Districts or states. Go through the district or state office to make an appointment, and cultivate a relationship with local staff, since they, too, are more accessible than staff in Washington. Likewise, see your elected state representative when the legislature is out of session. Think about inviting them to your site/facility/lab when they are in town for a lively, interactive 30 minutes, so that they can actually experience the issues you want to raise with them.

7. Sending a thank-you note is a must—and it's appreciated. A hand-written note is the most personal, but be aware that security concerns may slow mail delivery. Particularly if you are using a thank you as a follow-up reminder, be prepared to fax a copy of the note, have it hand delivered, or send it via e-mail.

8. You are 100% responsible for follow-up. Don't assume that an agreement for each of you (you and the person you're educating) to follow up in different ways means that they will hold up their end of the deal. It's all on you. They will likely need reminders, certainly a follow-up note immediately after the meeting. Always ask the staff member you are working with what their communication preference is as you go forward, be it phone or email.

Always remember: “What’s in it for them?”