



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION OF CONGREGATIONS

Washington Office for Advocacy

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TIPS ON VISITING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Face-to-face visits with your elected officials (or their staff) are the most influential form of advocacy. This direct lobbying can be time-consuming, but it can also be fun, interesting, and highly motivating for those participate!

This guide will walk you the process of setting up a group lobby visit in your area. There are a number of times in a year when members of Congress leave Washington, DC, and return to their home districts/states for "Congressional Work Periods." These are usually around holidays, and are a great opportunity for effective advocacy.

Visit Overview

Relationships are key to effective advocacy and organizing, so we encourage you to view all interactions with Congressional offices as opportunities for building relationship. Ideally you want those offices to see you and your congregation (coalition, group, etc.) as a credible, powerful, and helpful voice for your issue. Your approach and behavior should move you towards these goals. Plan to focus on a single issue, and for a meeting that will last 15-45 minutes.

Set-Up and Planning

1. Assemble a Group

While it's certainly possible and effective to arrange a visit for a single individual, we recommend putting together a delegation. Group visits are more influential, and the experience will build relationships and skills among all participants. First, clearly identify the issue you'll be lobbying on (pick only one!!!) and the kind of delegation you seek. A good place to start is with members of your congregation. Interfaith groups and broader coalition delegations (business, secular non-profits, religious, etc) are also good options. Second, identify a rough timeframe for your visit and compile a list of all those who are potentially interested. This step is important because you may not get your first choice for a time to visit, so plan for some back and forth. Try to keep delegations fairly small, as in 3-5 people. Large delegations can be difficult to coordinate.

2. Schedule a Visit

Check your Member's website (see introduction for how to find it) for information on setting up a meeting—many offices require a written request. If you cannot find such info, call the office and ask to speak to the person in charge of scheduling. Identify yourself as a constituent and member of [name your congregation/coalition], and request a meeting with the Representative/Senator on [name your issue]. Setting up a visit often requires several follow-ups calls. Plan for the process to take 1-3 weeks.

3. Prepare for the Visit

- Research the official's record on the issue. Ideally you'll find something positive to thank them for that connects with the request you're about to make. The websites of groups that work on the issue may have information about their voting record. You can also visit your Congressperson's homepage to read their statements, press releases, and position papers.
- Once you know where the office stands, determine your ask and what arguments/materials best support you. A friendly office can be thanked for their leadership on the issue and asked to do more. An office on the fence can be educated about the issue with compelling personal stories. A hostile office can be reminded that they have constituents who hold contrary positions, and/or will be hurt by the policies (i.e., seek to put a human face on the issue). Your ask should be a specific action, such as voting for/against a certain bill.
- Identify your best arguments and assign each member of your delegation responsibility for covering one or more points. There are probably several organizations who work on your issue with helpful websites; try the UUA Washington Office's links page for starters. Learn about relevant legislation as well as effective arguments for your point of view. Familiarize yourself with the arguments of the "opposition" and be prepared to counter them. In an ideal world, the member will actually use some of your talking points in future communications about the issue!
 - Compelling personal stories will stick with people longer than facts—although you should also have some facts to help validate your stories.
 - Use religious language and arguments—speaking as a person of faith is often highly effective, especially on issues where officials probably hear a great deal from religious people with whom we disagree.
- Bring a packet of supporting materials to leave with the office. In some instances, a member may lack important details about the pros and cons of a particular matter. It is therefore helpful to share with the member information and examples that demonstrate clearly the impact or benefits associated with a particular issue or piece of legislation. Your information packet might include:
 - Information about your organization and contact information (most important!!!)
 - Letters or handouts from yourself or from supportive organization
 - Background information or polling
 - Personal stories

- Other supporting information, such as local media coverage and newspaper editorials.

Conducting the Visit

- Dress neatly and conservatively. On groups visits, have a brief review and pep rally outside the office beforehand (perhaps also with a meditation or prayer).
- Remember that you're trying to build a relationship, so your disposition/approach should be polite and reasonable. Relax. Stick to your talking points and avoid speaking out of anger or frustration.
- Expect some introductions and pleasantries: who you are, where you're from, etc. One person (generally the person who set up the visit) should take the lead by introducing the group and the reason for the visit. For example: "Good Morning Senator Smith. Thanks for meeting with us. We're here from the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Cityville, with 250 members, to talk about the Marriage Amendment, S.J. Res. 1, and we'd like to introduce ourselves and say a little about why we feel strongly about this issue.")
- Have each person make their arguments and conclude with your ask. Use your stories and validate them with facts. Thank the official for something if at all possible. Be prepared for the questions and give-and-take of the visit; but always keep returning to your central message.
- A legislator may disagree strongly with your assumptions and with the goals you advocate. That's OK—don't be over-argumentative. If you don't know an answer, say so. If the Member or staffer asks you for information that you do not have, say that you do not have it but will get it in a few days. Never lie or make things up! Indeed, committing to get back to them gives you an opportunity to prove that you are credible and trustworthy.
- Press for a commitment. Will they support your position? If not, why not? When and how will they make a decision?
- End on a positive note. If you have found common ground, recognize where you disagree, but return to that "feel good" point. Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information, in the event the member expresses interest or asks questions.

After the Visit

- Debrief with your group. How did it go? Were participants happy with how they did? What arguments were most influential? What are the key factors in their decision-making, and what else can you do to influence them?

- Report how the visit went to others in the congregation or organizations (such as the UUA Washington Office!), especially if the visit is part of a larger effort.
- Follow up with the office by sending a thank you letter to the Member or staffer you met with, along with any additional information and materials you pledged to provide. Building a relationship with an office is the best way to make your voice heard on Capitol Hill. A meeting gets your foot in the door - it's in the follow-up that you're going to see results.
- Encourage others you know to do similar visits.

Appointment Request Template

[Your Address]

[Date]

The Honorable [full name]
U.S. Senate (or U.S. House of Representatives)
Washington, DC 20510 (20515 for House)

Dear Senator (or Representative) [last name]:

I am a member of the [UU Congregation, coalition, etc] in [your city], and we'd like to meet with you about [issue]. We are hoping that you might be available sometime in the [specify time and date range].

I can also be reached by phone at _____ or email at _____.

Thank you for considering our request to meet with you.

Sincerely,