PLANNING A DAY ON THE HILL

Face-to-face meetings are the most effective way to influence your legislators. You can meet with them in their district offices or in Washington, D.C. If you are unable to see your lawmakers in person, it’s still well worth your while to meet with their staff. Congressional staffs work closely with members. They are often as informed as their bosses about policy and legislative issues, and they greatly influence their bosses’ positions and votes.

PLANNING YOUR VISITS

- Your lawmaker will take time to meet with you and listen to your concerns because you are a constituent — you live in his or her state or district. If you are planning your visits with a team from your state, by all means, go to see some of the state’s other representatives. But try whenever possible to have a constituent in your group — those are the voices that matter to elected representatives.

- Don’t write off any of your representatives. Even if you think their minds are made up, they might be open to some of your arguments. And even if they take a different view, they need to hear what their constituents think.

- If you are scheduling several meetings, budget ample time to get from office to office. Capitol Hill is a big place!

- Generally, members of Congress are in Washington Tuesday through Thursday, so schedule your meetings then. They are frequently absent Friday through Monday and when Congress is not in session.

ARRANGING AN APPOINTMENT

- Find your legislator’s Web site by visiting house.gov or senate.gov, then entering your ZIP code to find your representative and his or her office contact information.

- There are two ways to make an appointment: sending a fax or e-mail, or calling the staffer who is responsible for immigration in your legislator’s Washington office. Often, it’s best to do both: send a request first, and then follow up with a call.

- Using the information on your legislator’s Web site, fax or e-mail an appointment request to his or her office. Send the fax or e-mail to the attention of the scheduler. Make sure to mention that you are a constituent!

- To make an appointment by phone, call your lawmaker’s office directly or go through the congressional switchboard (1-800-426-8073). When you get through to the staffer responsible for your issue, explain the purpose of the meeting and who will be attending. Make sure to mention that you are a constituent!

COORDINATING YOUR LOBBY TEAM

- Give some thought to the size of the group that will attend the meeting with you. It’s a good idea to go in as a team, but don’t take too many. Congressional offices are small, and too many people talking at once can dilute the impact of your message. Try to limit your group to no more than five.

- Make sure everyone in your group is prepared. Brief everyone attending the meeting, and make sure they have any written materials to review well ahead of time.
• Meet as a group ahead of time. Be certain everyone agrees on your central message and what you want to ask the legislator to do for you. The last thing you want is to have an argument in front of your elected official or their staff.

• Be organized. Before each meeting, designate a team leader to introduce the issue and handle the flow of the conversation. Designate a secretary to take notes. Assign each participant an issue to bring up during the meeting.

PREPARING FOR THE MEETING
• DO YOUR HOMEWORK! Know exactly what you want to say and carefully review your message.

• Learn all you can in advance about your lawmaker and his or her views on immigration.

• Prepare some evidence that bolsters your position.

• Like most people, legislators and their staff are most persuaded by human examples and arguments conveyed in personal terms. They can read what the experts think about the issue; they can look up the facts. What no one else can do as well as you is make it real. What made you care about immigration? How does it affect you — or your family or your neighbors? Bolster your argument with a story about your business or your workers. That’s what will make your case memorable to your representative: a compelling story or a vivid, human example.

• The best evidence is information about something occurring in the legislator’s own district or state — not national trends or national statistics, but local ones.

• Don’t overdo the evidence — particularly the statistics. If you deluge your elected official with too many numbers, they will lose their impact. Prepare a few dramatic figures to illustrate your points. Collect one or two recent local news articles that make the case.

• Know the counter arguments and be ready to answer any questions respectfully.

• Prepare some material to leave with your legislator — some background information on your coalition, a fact sheet, perhaps some newspaper clippings. But again, don’t overdo it — an informative page or two is plenty. Attach your business card(s) to the packet.

MAKING THE PRESENTATION
• Be on time!

• Begin by introducing yourselves — make sure the legislator or staffer understands that you are constituents.

• Explain to the legislator or staffer why you asked for the meeting.

• Present your concerns simply and directly. Get to your bottom line immediately. Be brief, direct, courteous, and positive. When presenting each issue, do not assume that your legislator has any prior knowledge of the subject.

• Presentation of each topic should follow this rough outline:
  o BACKGROUND: Explain the issue in the simplest possible terms.
  o IMPACT: Explain how the issue directly affects your community or the group you represent.
  o RECOMMENDATION: Indicate what you would like your legislator to do — in specific terms. Discuss important legislation or issues currently before Congress and how you hope your representative will vote. Explain how your community will be affected if he or she doesn’t vote that way. Explain how you will be affected. Lay out the consequences in
concrete terms. Finally, ask your lawmaker directly to vote for the legislation you support.

- Don’t discuss too many issues or ask for too much. Make sure your lawmaker and his or her staff members understand what your priorities are. You don’t want to confuse or overwhelm them. Try to achieve something concrete with this visit — you can discuss another issue the next time.

- Do not fight with your legislator or staff members. Politely answer questions and concerns. If you must disagree about something, make your point and move on. Remember, you are meeting with the member or staff person to inform them about your position on the issues.

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

- Make sure you do not do all of the talking! Ask questions. Give your legislator opportunities to ask questions or state his or her opinion. Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard.

- Stay away from jargon and acronyms. Remember, your legislator deals with dozens, if not hundreds, of issues each week.

- Thank your legislators if they have been supportive. They get criticized far more often than they get thanked. They will appreciate your recognition.

- Be sure to ask for your legislator’s support. If your lawmaker is already supportive, ask him or her to do more — to cosponsor a bill, to take a leadership role in moving it through the legislative process, to find additional cosponsors, or in some other way.

DON’T

- Don’t be offended or express disappointment if your meeting turns out to be with a staffer. A meeting with staff can be just as valuable as a meeting with a member — sometimes more so. If you build a good relationship with a staffer, he or she becomes your eyes and ears and your advocate in your lawmaker’s office.

- Don’t be offended if you end up meeting out in the hall. It’s no reflection on you — it just means all available meeting spaces in your lawmaker’s office were booked or the one that was free was too small to accommodate your group.

- A typical Hill visit lasts half an hour or less. Don’t be offended if your lawmakers or their staff are in a hurry or need to cut the conversation short. They are very busy, and that often happens — it doesn’t mean they didn’t appreciate the visit.

- Don’t make things up. Don’t exaggerate for effect. If you don’t know the answer to a question, don’t pretend you do. Your lawmaker or his or her staff will find out soon enough, and it will undermine whatever you achieved with your visit.

- Don’t talk about the campaign with staff. Don’t talk about campaign contributions. The laws against staff involvement in their members’ campaigns are very strict, and you could be putting both the member and the staff person at risk.

FOLLOWING UP AFTER THE MEETING

- 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.