

Tips for Building Relationships with Legislators

Legislators value personal meetings with constituents and advocates who have valuable information on an issue. The following tips can help you make the most out of a discussion with your elected officials:

Visiting Legislators (in state & local offices)

DO:

- Always schedule meetings with legislators rather than "dropping in." When scheduling an appointment, make it clear that you are a constituent! Send a fax confirmation.
- Study his or her bio prior to your meeting to get a better sense of the legislator's district, background and interests. Each member of the California Legislature has a biography that is retrievable online (at www.leginfo.ca.gov/yourleg.html)
- Be respectful of the legislator's schedule: be on time for your meeting and get right to the point.
- Address your legislator properly (Assembly Member or Senator); be courteous, and reasonable. Thank the legislator for his or her time and attention
- Bring a photo of your child. Use personal examples to illustrate your point, particularly those that affect the quality, access or cost of care to constituents like you and your family.
- Keep the meeting brief and to the point. Excess information may deter the legislator from gaining an understanding of your core issues and concerns. Plan what you are going to talk about in advance: what are your key points to explain and support your issue?
- If a legislator asks you a question you can't answer, it is OK to say you don't know. If you can get the information to answer their question, tell them you will get it to them at a later time.
- Listen carefully to the legislator's questions and concerns about your issue. Don't become partisan or defensive if they seem opposed to your position. Keep the meeting positive, respectful, interesting and full of information.
- Ask them if they would like more information to clear up questions and concerns they may have.

- If you feel comfortable doing so, ask the legislator directly if they support your issues and whether they intend to vote in your favor (if there is a bill to vote on). This will give you a better understanding of the level of support your issue has.
- If possible, prepare a single-page handout with key information that can be left with the legislator for her or his future use in either framing a debate or proposing legislation in support of your issue. As always, your points should be well-organized, concise, and accurate. Make sure you have contact information on the handout in case the legislator has additional questions.
- The goal of your meeting is to establish good communication lines with the legislator and to educate them about your issues. If appropriate, offer them a standing invitation to visit your location. The best possible outcome of a meeting is to establish an ongoing relationship with the legislator.
- Before leaving, thank the legislator for their time. Their time is in great demand and your courtesy will be well received.
- Follow up your visit with a letter. Thank the legislator for their support, if support was indicated or for the opportunity to present your view. Also, send any additional information which may have been requested about your issue or your organization. If you had been unable to answer a question during the visit, look up the answer and include it in your letter.

DON'T:

- Allow yourself to feel intimidated; you are an expert in this field.
- Get angry, argue or lecture when discussing the issues
- Be derogatory about your opponents
- Make threats
- Concern yourself with the legislator's party affiliation; most issues affecting medicine are not decided on party-line philosophies
- "Wing it" if asked a question you cannot answer; defer to someone who knows or promise to get the information back to the legislator
- NEVER discuss bills or issues in conjunction with fundraising/contributions