TIPS FOR HOLDING AN EFFECTIVE MEETING WITH CONGRESSIONAL STAFF

BEFORE THE MEETING

Make a Plan

- First and foremost, it is important to be properly prepared for your meetings. Talking things out ahead of time, even if it's only briefly, can do a lot to ease nerves and make sure the meeting runs smoothly.
- Make sure you know who you're meeting with. If they work for a personal office, this includes the state or district they represent and any relevant Committee assignments or leadership roles held by their boss. For Committee staff, this includes knowing the jurisdiction of the Committee and where their work intersects with yours.

Establish a Lead

- Once you've identified who all will be attending the meeting from your contingent, take a moment to talk with them about the meeting. You will want to determine who will lead the meeting and where others can or should contribute, if possible.
- A meeting lead should be able to softly facilitate the meeting and keep things on track. If someone in the meeting is a particular expert on the topic, or from the state or district of the staffer you're meeting with, they may be an ideal lead. Having one main speaker will avoid having too many voices going at once, which can be distracting for staffers.
- You should also discuss the key messages you are trying to convey in the meeting. Keeping the key messages to two or three items is a good idea so you can focus adequately on a few issues, rather than superficially on a number of issues.
- It can be helpful bring supporting materials that provide background and testimony to your issue that you can leave with the staffer. You should note, however, that giving out too much paper may swamp the staffer with so much material that they aren't able to get around to reading any of it. It may also be a good idea to have extra copies, as you never know when a staffer may bring a colleague.
- Remember that while any number of variables might change when you arrive at the office, including who you're meeting with, where you'll be meeting with them, and how long you'll be meeting, it is important to have a game plan of what you would like to get out of the meeting.

IN THE MEETING

Arriving at the Office

- Remember that from the moment you step into a Congressional office, you're representing your organization, your coalition, and your cause.
- Plan to arrive a few minutes early to give you time for any unexpected delays. Politely inform the secretary of scheduler in the front office who you are and who you're meeting with. They may ask you for a business card, so if possible, have plenty on hand.
- Extend any courtesy to the secretary or front office staffer as you wait. You never know where they might end up in the future, so a cordial conversation about who they are, where they're from and how they're enjoying working on the Hill can do a lot to make a good impression and show the staffer that you feel comfortable in their office.
- While you're waiting for the staffer or member, be polite and respectful and avoid loud conversations. In generally, be mindful of what you say. Keep this general rule of thumb anywhere around Capitol Hill as you never know who is around the corner.

A Brief Hello

- When you enter the meeting, try to avoid wasting time. Check with the staffer to confirm how much time they have available to meet with you.

- Quickly take your seats and allow the meeting leader to initiate introductions of every in attendance. Go around the table and briefly remind the staffer who you are, who you work for and what you do.
- Telling a staffer what you do provides them with a better picture of who you are and also identifies how you might be a resource for them in the future. It may be a good idea to think about this before the meeting so that you can have a clear and concise description of your work that takes no longer than 10 or 15 seconds.
- After everyone from your group has introduced themselves, the meeting lead should ask the same of the staffer. You might say something like "Well John, now that we've introduced ourselves, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about your background and what issues you're working on." This allows engages the staffer from the get-go and demonstrates your interest in what they have to say.
- Remember that the longer you take on introductions, the less time you'll have to get into the meat of the meeting.

Stay on Message

- One of the most important things to remember as you get into the content of your meeting is to stay on message. This is where a bit of pre-meeting discussion or planning goes a long way, ensuring that everyone is on the same page about what the message(s) of the meeting are.
- It is easy to get wrapped into all of the ancillary issues around your particular topic of the meeting, but you should try to avoid this. Again, make sure you keep your meeting to two or three main points. This allows the staffer to more easily remember what you had to say and also makes it easier to stay on track during the meeting. You may be eager to talk about a whole host of issues, but keeping it focused and on message is important to creating resonance on the Hill.
- Staying on message can be hard when staffers try to pull you off message, either on purpose or simply because they want to discuss your perspective on another issue. If this happens, try to politely direct the meeting back to the message you're trying to communicate. Feel free to suggest another meeting, phone call, or correspondence, at a later date if the staffer wants to discuss another issue.

Stay Above the Politics

- Politics is king here in DC so it can be easy to get pulled into political conversations or arguments. This is a further tip on staying on message: stay above the politics. A staffer might say something like "yea but these Republicans will never vote for that." Try not to get pulled into this, either in support or defense of your political persuasion.
- Neutrality is a mark of professionalism, even on Capitol Hill, so you'll be perceived as a credible and dignified resource if you stay above the fray.

Responding to the Staffer

- As you move through the meeting, try to remember that Congressional staffers frequently work on a number of diverse issues and may not be up-to-speed on every detail of your issue. You may be playing a significant educational role for the staffer, so keep this in mind and do not assume that they know every acronym or detail of a topic.
- On the other hand, some staffers may know more about the issue than you expect. They may ask detailed questions on your issue that you're unprepared to answer. It's perfectly acceptable to let the staffer know that you're not sure and you will get back to them with an answer at a later date. Responding in this way is far better than providing bad information, something that can ruin your credibility on the Hill.

Wrapping Things Up

- Many people neglect the end of the meeting and fail to effectively wrap things up. When your time is up, recap what you discussed and note any items that you agreed you would do for the staffer, as well as reinforce with them any items that they agreed to do for you. Keeping good notes on this will be important towards making sure you maintain a good working relationship with the staffer.
- Be sure to thank them for meeting with you and make yourself available in any way you can to help them do their job.

AFTER THE MEETING

- After the meeting, either within a few hour or a few days, send a thank you note to the staffer. You can thank them again for meeting with you, provide a brief reminder of what was discussed and note and you said you would do for them what they would do for you.
- A thank you note is a great way to express your appreciation for the meeting, providing any follow up materials or information, providing an easy way to contact you in the future, and generally maintaining the relationship.