

What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is when an individual or a group attempts to influence an elected official's decision on a specific issue. This can come in many forms from in-person meetings, to phone calls to petitions and letter writing campaigns. This guide is going to specifically focus on how to engage with your elected officials in a one-on-one meeting. Whatever the issue is that you are most passionate about you can use these skills to better argue your case and work to influencing public policy decisions that affect the issue.

****REMEMBER elected officials are in office to serve us. It is your job to tell your member of congress that a particular issue is of interest to you. If you don't take the initiative to meet with your member of congress, you can't blame them for not taking action.****

Before Your Meeting

- **Schedule the meeting** – to schedule the meeting you should call the office of your member of congress and ask to speak to the scheduler. You can find the names of the majority of legislative staff here: <http://bit.ly/mocinfo>.
 - Tell them why you want the meeting and what issues you would like to discuss.
 - Chances are you will not meet with the member of congress but one of their Legislative Assistants (LA). These LAs focus on specific issues and they work directly for your member of congress. For the majority of international issues you will be speaking to the Foreign Policy LA.
 - When you call you should confirm a date, time and the length of your meeting.
 - Sometimes you may have to request the meeting via fax. If this is the case include the same information and be sure to ask if they have a specific form they would like you to use.
- **Do your research** – you want to be well versed in the topic you plan to discuss but you are not expected to be an expert and you should not claim to be. However, you should know as much about the issue as you can so you can effectively convey your argument, defend your position, and answer some questions. Remember that oftentimes your representative may not be well versed in the topic you wish to discuss so you might have to educate them.
- **Know the talking points** – it is important that you use talking points that other advocates are using for the same issues you are focusing on.
 - Using similar talking points helps to convey a unified message especially when there is a major policy ask
 - You can find talking points and information about the issue on most NGO websites who are working on similar issues
- **Plan out the meeting** – You want plan how your meeting will go especially if you are going as a group. It is important to have a game plan and a talking order to avoid people talking over one another, interrupting or worse contradicting one another. Having a plan before you have the meeting will mitigate any confusion or complications while you are in the meeting. Remember, these representatives are extremely busy; you want to use your time effectively and efficiently.

- **Rehearse the talking points** – You should rehearse the talking points so you are comfortable with the information and the ask. Again, you can usually find talking points on various NGO websites and if you reach out to them, more often than not they will be able to provide you with the most up-to-date talking points and major policy asks. When you are in the meeting you want to be fluid with the conversation and know what points you want to bring up. It is fine to bring with you a “cheat sheet” so you have something to refer to.
- **Decide the goal of the meeting** – You must decide the goal of the meeting. Are you asking your representative to commit to additional funding? To vote against a bill? To co-sponsor a bill? What is the point of the meeting? Without a specific policy ask a meeting is usually not very effective.
- **Confirm the appointment** – a few days before your scheduled appointment you should call the scheduler once again and confirm the appointment and your allotted time.

The Day of Your Meeting

- **Bring materials** – You should bring information about the issues you are discussing and about you and your group. Some examples of good materials to bring:
 - a copy of the bill you want your representative to support
 - pictures from an event you held
 - one-pagers about the issue
 - pictures or documentation from the situation on the ground
 - brief info about you and your organization, who you are, what your group does, how many people support your group (it is good when you can say I am a constituent and I support this issue, it’s even better when you can say myself and my group of 100 constituents supports this issue)
- **Dress in business attire** – Capitol Hill is a formal city and you are making a formal appointment. Make sure you dress in standard business attire whether you are meeting in-district or on the Hill. You want to appear professional and you want your representative or their legislative assistant to take you seriously
- **Practice the talking points and the order** – Go over your talking points and the order each member of your group is going to present
- **Arrive on time and be patient** – You don’t want to show up late for your meeting, it looks terrible and is definitely a turn off. In addition to that, these people are extremely busy. If you are late for a 15 minute appointment you may only have 5 minutes to meet with them since they have another appointment scheduled immediately after yours. With that said, there is a chance your representative may be running late. If that is the case wait until it’s your time.

During Your Meeting

- **Introduce yourself and who you represent** – You want to make sure you tell them who you are, why you are there, and what groups or organizations you are there representing.
- **Thank them** – It sounds simple but oftentimes people are so wrapped up in the talking points and the ask that they forget to thank their representative for meeting with them.
- **Stick to the talking points** – The average meeting will last approximately 15-20 minutes. You do not have time to get off track and off topic. Introduce yourself, give a brief synopsis of the issue (remember they may not know much about it) and then jump into the talking points and the ask.
- **Present the ask** – The ask is the most important part of the meeting. It is your purpose for being there. You want to make sure your ask is clear and succinct. It should be easy to understand what it is you are asking your representative to do.

- **Give them the materials** – You did the research, you printed copies, make sure you remember to give them the information you brought. This info includes the one-pagers, biographical information about you and your organization, copies of the bill, photos, etc.
- **“I don’t know, but I’ll find out”** – If your representative asks you a question that you don’t know the answer to it is perfectly OK to say you do not know. You are not expected to be an expert and they should not think you are. Tell them you don’t know but you will find out and get back to them. Then do it! The last thing you want to do is to make something up or provide them with incorrect information. Additionally, telling them you will get back to them with additional information is a great way to follow up.
- **Schedule a follow up** – Before you leave the office you want to tell them you are going to follow up to find out if they did what you asked. Either ask them if they can get back to you or tell them you will follow up and give them a specific date of when you are going to follow up.

After Your Meeting

- Follow up with a thank you and any additional information. You should do this as soon as possible
- Follow up to confirm that they did what you asked. You should do this on or around the date you specified for your follow up during the meeting.

Asks Do’s & Don’ts

Do:

- **Be specific** – You want your ask to be specific. It should be clear and direct. For example: “Will you vote against Bill _____” or “Will you commit to funding \$10 billion a year for five years to combat HIV/AIDS”
- **Use organization’s asks** – many NGOs who focus on specific issues have structured and researched policy asks on their websites. They are the experts, they have crafted these asks for a reason, and you should use them. Feel free to reach out to various organizations to get more information about what you should be “asking”.
- **Explain the importance/effect of action and inaction** – Tell them, “If this bill passes ___ million children will have access to healthcare.” Or “if you do not vote against this proposed budget ___ millions of refugees will no longer have protection and housing because of the cuts in the international aid budget.” But don’t make it up. Tell them why the issue is important to you and why you believe they should follow through on your ask.

Don’t:

- **Be vague** – As we said your ask needs to be specific.
- **Leave it open ended** – Along with being specific, your ask should have a clear action. “Will you care more about ending the use of child soldiers in East Africa” has no clear action. An example of an ask with a clear action is: “Will you co-sponsor the Child Soldier Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Act that over the next five years will help establish programs to bring an end to the use of child soldiers and help reintegrate them into society.”