



Tips on Meeting with Elected and Appointed Officials— It's Easier Than You Think!

Setting up and participating in meetings with an elected or appointed official is not difficult. In almost all cases, they will welcome meeting with people who can educate them and their staff about an issue. And the views you express can have a significant impact.

Issues important to our communities are on the front burner for state and local elected and appointed officials across the country. Those officials—legislators, governors, mayors, county and city councils, school boards, zoning and ABC boards—want to hear what we think about those issues.

We can all write letters, and we should certainly do that, but actually meeting with your elected or appointed officials can have a major impact. And this is something we all can do.

Monitoring Developing Issues

It is important to be aware of developing issues on which lobbying can be useful. Getting in for a lobby visit early in the legislative or administrative process is the best way to affect the outcome. Monitor your local press for new issues of concern to our communities. Also, legislatures and administrative agencies have web sites on which they often (but not always) identify issues they will be considering and give timetables for such consideration.

Monitoring & Participating in the Committee Process

Almost all legislative proposals are considered by a Committee before being voted on in the Congress or state legislature. The staff of the Committee (which may be different than the staffs of the individual legislators) will do the necessary research, prepare a draft of the legislative measure and brief the legislators who are assigned to be members of that Committee.

It is important to monitor the Committee process to identify new legislative proposals at an early stage. Most Committees—certainly all Committees of the U.S. Congress—have websites that identify proposals under consideration and set forth the schedules for Committee hearings, Committee meetings and

Committee votes. NCSF can help you find the right Committee and point you to its website.

Meeting with Committee staffers early in their development of a proposed piece of legislation can be effective, particularly on issues relating to BDSM and other non-traditional sex practices. Staffers will generally know little about the real practice of BDSM or other non-traditional sex practices and are likely to have adverse preconceptions that are important to dispel. You should try to become a resource that provides information that is both helpful to the Committee staff, and that can have a significant influence on the legislation that they draft.

As the legislative process proceeds, it will become important to have lobby meetings with the legislators' personal staffs and possibly with the legislators themselves. NCSF can provide guidance as to the timing of such contacts.

What is a Lobby Visit?

A lobby visit is a meeting where you tell your elected representative or appointed official what you think about a certain issue or bill. Whether it is a City Council Member or your Congressional Representative, as one of their constituents you can ask them to take action on an issue of legislation, or of government policy/practice.

You can easily find the office of your local and national elected officials in your area. Some Members of Congress have more than one office in their congressional district, and permanent staff members are usually available for you to meet with. State legislators and governors can be reached at the state capitol or in their local offices. Local officials are equally easy to contact.

Requesting Your Meeting

Make your request in writing and follow up with a call to the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler. Be prepared to meet first with the elected official's staff. Remember that the official relies on the staff, both to educate the official about the issue and to make recommendations. Based on what happens at the staff meeting, you may or may not seek a further meeting with the elected official.

Suggest specific times and dates for your meeting. Let them know what issue or legislation you wish to discuss. Make sure they know that you are a constituent.

Prepare for Your Meeting

Contact the NCSF to help you decide on your talking points, and get information that you can leave with your elected official.

Decide who will attend the meeting. Bringing more than four or five people can be hard to manage.

Agree on talking points. Your goal is to make a strong case for your position, so don't disagree in the meeting. If a point is causing tension in the group, leave it out.

Plan your meeting keeping in mind that time is limited. Decide who will start the conversation, and which points each person will make. If possible, each person should focus on why this is important to them personally, in addition to the general talking points.

Decide what you want achieve. Do you want your elected official to vote for or against a bill? Do you want them to support your issue or oppose a restrictive ordinance? Ask them to do something specific.

During the Meeting

Be prompt and patient. Elected officials and their staff run on very tight schedules.

Keep it short and focused. You will have twenty minutes or less with a staff person, and as little as ten minutes if you meet with your elected official. Stick to your talking points.

Know your elected official's record on similar issues or legislation. Begin by thanking them for voting in support of your issues, and for taking the time to meet with you.

Leave only a few pages of information that contain your main points. Include your contact information, and offer to provide more detailed information on any points in which the official or staff expresses particular interest.

Provide concise personal and local examples of the impact of the legislation or issue. This is the most important thing you can do in a lobby visit.

You don't need all of the information on an issue. If you don't know the answer to a question, it is fine to tell the elected official that you will get that information. This gives you the chance to contact them again about the issue.

Set deadlines for a response. You sometimes won't get a definitive answer at the meeting. Ask when you should check back in to find out what your elected official intends to do about your request. If you need to get information to them, set a date for when this will happen.

After the Meeting

Right after the meeting, compare notes with everyone in your group to confirm what the elected official committed to do and what follow up information you committed to send.

One of you should promptly send a thank you letter for meeting with you. That letter can briefly summarize the main points you made in the meeting and can list any action items to be pursued further.

Follow up immediately with any requested materials and information.

If the elected official or staff member doesn't meet the deadline for action you agreed to during the meeting, ask him or her to set another deadline. Be persistent, polite, and flexible.

Let NCSF know what you learned during your meeting by e-mailing:
lobbying@ncsfreedom.org

Meeting with your elected officials is the best way to demonstrate that there is a constituency for civil liberties in your district. It's easy to make a difference.

Lobbying is Fun & NCSF Can Help

NCSF regularly helps local groups and individuals to prepare for and engage in lobbying at the Federal, State and local levels. Almost without exception, participants in such lobbying have found it a productive and enjoyable experience. You will learn a lot and find that you can make a difference on issues important to all of us.

Links

E the People

Access to over 170,000 government officials in 9,800 towns and cities. Write a letter, start a petition, research election candidates and more!

Project Vote Smart

Biographical details and contact information for over 13,000 candidates and elected officials

Write Your Representative

From the U.S. House of Representatives website

U.S. House of Representatives

Full contact information for our Congressional Representatives

U.S. Senate

Full contact information for our Senators