

Six practical tips on how to advocate with your legislator or elected official

1. Establish your agenda and goals.

- Know what subject you are going to address. Don't overload with issues – stick to no more than two or three.
- Decide what you would like to get out of the visit, i.e., a commitment to vote for your issue, leadership on the issue, or you may decide the visit is simply informational.
- Allow time for small talk at the outset, but not too much. Remember, it's your visit.

2. Listen well.

- Much of lobbying is listening, looking for indications of the elected official's views, and finding opportunities to provide good information.
- Listening can allow you the opportunity to find areas of common ground on an issue.
- If you are meeting with a "silent type," draw her/him out by asking questions.
- If you are confronted with a "long-winded type." Look for openings to bring her/him back to the point.

3. Be prepared, but don't feel that you need to be an expert.

- Most elected officials are generalists, like many of us. Do your homework, but don't feel that you need to know every little detail of an issue. Air personal feelings and experiences where appropriate. Relate the concerns of your friends and members of the community.
- Know when to admit "I don't know," and offer to follow up with the information.
- Be open to counter-arguments, but don't get stuck on them. Don't be argumentative or confrontational.

4. Don't stay too long.

- Try to get closure on your issue. If you hear what you had hoped for, express your thanks and leave. If you reach an impasse, thank the legislator, even if disappointed, and say so. End the meeting and continue the discussion at another time.

5. Remember you are there to build a relationship.

- If the elected official is good on an issue you've been involved in or has supported your position in the past, be sure to acknowledge your appreciation during the course of the visit.
- If the opposite is true, think of the phrase, "No permanent friends, no permanent enemies." Someday, on some issue of importance to you, they may come through. In the meantime, your visit may prevent the official from being an active opponent of your issue.

6. Follow-up is important.

- Be sure to send a thank-you note after the visit. If commitments were made in the meeting, repeat your understanding of them. If staff members were present, write to them too. They can often be important allies.