



# How to Conduct an In-District Meeting with a Member of Congress (or the Staff)

There are few tasks more important in the fight against hunger than building relationships with members of Congress and their staffs, whether in Washington, D.C., or at home in the member's state or district. Advocacy, like sales, is persuading somebody to do something, and the most can be gained when there is an established relationship and when there is trust. Building a trusting relationship requires diligent work over time, but it can have huge payoffs when hunger-related legislation is up for a vote.

In nearly all cases, an in-state or in-district meeting will involve seeing a staff member(s) and not the member of Congress him/herself. As a grassroots activist, building positive relationships with key staffers in local congressional offices should be your primary goal.

Elected officials have hundreds of issues they're trying to keep track of, which is why staff are so important. These issues are delegated to staffers who work on a portfolio of issues. Some may work on Social Security and Medicare, while others might work on agriculture and rural development.

Meeting with the staff member who handles the issue you're working on is often the wisest use of your time. Staffers' schedules are more open than the senator's or representative's, and the staffers will be advising their boss when decisions need to be made.

Establishing a positive relationship with a staffer takes some persistence but is one of the most valuable things you can do as an advocate.

## Scheduling a meeting with a staffer

So how do you schedule a meeting in the first place? Here are some simple steps:

- 1. Identify the staffer.** Many times, staff in the district offices handle constituent case work—for example, if someone is having a problem with her Social Security check or collecting a FEMA payment. Often, the staffers who handle substantive issues work in the Washington, D.C., office. If that's the case, you have two options. Meet by conference call or video



Bread for the World photo

conference in the local office. Just about every office has video-conferencing capabilities, though some offices don't allow them for public use. The way to figure this out is to simply call the local office. Identify yourself as a constituent, ask who the point person is on the issue you're working on, and figure out the best way to schedule a meeting.

- 2. Schedule the meeting.** Scheduling a meeting with the right staffer is almost always less formal than with the senator or representative. Just ask the person who picks up the phone in the office how the staff person likes to be contacted. It will likely be by phone or email.
- 3. Do your homework.** Contact your Bread regional organizer to bat around ideas about the best ways to approach the discussion. If it's a domestic issue, data about how the programs would affect the state/district will be helpful. If it's an international issue, are there any locally based nonprofits that this would affect? Is the official a person of faith? Are they fiscally

conservative? Knowing these things will help you prepare the best case.

4. **Mobilize your team.** Contact everyone in your local group who agreed to meet. It's a good idea to meet twice before the meeting—once to bring everyone up to speed (a quick conference call is good for this), and once right before the meeting. The latter will assure everyone is on time. Make sure everyone agrees on certain roles. For example, one person can be in charge of introductions (including Bread for the World, if necessary), another on telling a compelling personal story, one who will make the “ask,” and one to follow up (see below).
5. **Go to the meeting.** Every meeting is different, but there are some simple guidelines to follow that will make your experience much easier:
  - Dress for success! Business attire is recommended.
  - The first question you should always ask is how much time you'll have. Staffers are very busy people; the meeting could last five minutes or an hour (usually it will be between 15 and 30 minutes). This is a sign of respect and creates a good first impression.
  - Read body language and ask questions. Before you launch into who you are and why the issue is important, ask if the staffer has heard of Bread for the World, how familiar they are with this issue, etc. It may give you clues about how to approach the issue. It wouldn't be good to waste part of your time with the staffer explaining the basics of your issue if he/she already knows them.
  - Make the ask. Is there a bill pending that needs co-sponsoring? A “dear colleague” letter that needs signing?
  - Figure out the best way to stay in touch. Staying in touch with the key aide who is the point person on the issue will be immensely helpful. Make sure to get his/her name and contact information and a preferred contact method.
6. **Follow-up.** Write a thank-you note. Contact your organizer to let Bread know how the meeting went, and brainstorm next steps.

## Keeping a Relationship Going

Throughout the course of a year, you will want to contact the key staff in the member of Congress' office by phone to do things like:

- **Sign onto “dear colleague” letters.** These are letters written by members of Congress with the intention of influencing other members in key positions. For example, a member of Congress who is not on the Appropriations Committee may initiate a dear colleague letter to the chair and ranking member (highest ranking member of Congress in the committee belonging to the minority party) of the committee asking him/her to take a specific action. A call from a local Bread leader to the lead staffer encouraging the member to sign the letter can be very influential.
- **Gather intelligence.** Grassroots activists can gather information through conversations with staff about how the member of Congress thinks about hunger-related issues. This is an immensely important task, as we will need to figure out where we can find common ground when Bread considers setting policy. Before important votes, we will need to identify how each member of Congress is leaning and persuade them, if necessary.
- **Urge leadership to advance certain priorities.** Often, much of the work in negotiating legislation happens among congressional leaders behind closed doors. Your member of Congress can speak to leadership and other key legislators to ensure certain priorities are represented in the final negotiated bill.
- **Ask for aye or nay votes on key legislation.** When a vote is coming up, activists can ask staff how their boss is leaning and persuade them to vote Bread's position.
- **Thank and/or express disappointment after key votes.** There's a saying in Washington that there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies. It's important that elected leaders be held accountable. A quick call to staff after a vote is a good way to remind them that anti-hunger advocates are watching closely.