CONGRESSIONAL VISIT TIPS

Meeting face to face with your Members of Congress and/or their staff members is one of the most effective advocacy tools at your disposal. Here are a few quick tips to help you make every congressional visit a success.

Be Prompt
✓ Try to be on time for all your meetings, even though they may keep you waiting. Schedules change quickly on Capitol Hill, but you want to be reliable and courteous. If your other meetings run long, call the next office to let them know you are running late.

Be Patient
✓ Be prepared to encounter changes at the very last minute. A visit with a Member may suddenly turn into a meeting with staff. Be gracious and go with the flow.
✓ You never know where a Hill meeting might be held—from a Senator’s grand office to a hallway to the building’s cafeteria!
✓ Treat everyone you encounter as a potential ally. Congressional staff may be young and may not know a lot about your issues, but they are gatekeepers to your Member and could end up being your best point of contact. See your meeting as an opportunity to build relationships with your Member’s office.

Be Prepared
✓ Have your talking points ready and know what you want to cover in the meeting. But also remember that you will need to be flexible—if you end up with less time than you planned for, give them the short version.
✓ In a group visit, be sure to plan in advance who will say what in the meeting.
✓ Leave behind materials that can be helpful to staff, like short fact sheets, stats on your PSA, etc. [Bring one n4a Policy Priorities packet plus your own agency information to each meeting.]

Be Persuasive
✓ Be clear about what you are asking for (e.g., reauthorization, increased appropriations) and why it is needed. Everyone comes to lawmakers asking for more federal dollars so you need to make the best possible case.
✓ Know your audience. Consider these and other factors as you plan your remarks:
  ○ BACKGROUND: It’s okay to ask a staffer how much they know about the Older Americans Act or the Aging Network at the beginning of the meeting. If they are new to
the issues, be sure to explain what a AAA or Title VI program does and how it fits into the larger Aging Network.

- **FEDERAL FOCUS:** While it is important to mention that Older Americans Act dollars leverage state and local funds and that your agency has a variety of funding streams, try to stay focused on federal funding and policy. Your audience of federal lawmakers and their staff want to know how they can help.

- **LIMITED TIME:** Members and even their staff have tremendous workloads and are sometimes at the mercy of floor action or committee schedules. If you are given generous time, go ahead and use it, but be aware that most visits will be rather short so plan your remarks accordingly. A ten-minute visit can still be very effective!

- **RESEARCH THE POLITICAL REALITIES:** The more you know about your Member and his/her district, philosophy, interests and allegiances, the better you can talk about your work in ways s/he can understand.

  ✓ Use numbers. Make the case for why you need additional resources with the hardest numbers possible. (How many individuals are on your waiting lists? Is that an increase over last year? How has sequestration and other federal funding reductions affected your services?)

**Be Passionate**

 ✓ Use anecdotes to bring your programs and services to life. As you know, people respond positively to our mission and often have personal experiences with caregiving or aging in place. Build on this with real life examples of how your agency helps older adults remain in their homes and communities for as long as possible.

 ✓ Congressional staff are usually passionate about their work too, so use language that allows them to get excited about your mission and how they and their boss can help you.

**Be a Professional Resource**

 ✓ Ask the Member or staff what you can do for them. If they ask questions you can’t answer, promise you’ll get back to them later. Offer to send them any additional materials or data. Invite them to visit your agency and let them know you welcome their calls if they have any questions about aging policy. Your goal is to become their local aging expert so they turn to you as an advocate for what your community needs!

 ✓ Follow up after the visit. Send a thank you note/email and then suggest a next step that will take your current relationship with the Member’s office to a higher level. For example, if the Member has never visited your agency or another site, extend an invite for the next or a future congressional recess (March 18-22 and April 15-26).

 ✓ Stay in touch. You now have, at the very least, the name of a staff member who is tasked with following aging issues. When n4a sends out an Advocacy Alert asking you to call or email Congress, cc: that staffer or call them directly with your concerns.

**Good luck!**