

Tips for meeting with your elected officials

Meeting with your elected official is simply a face-to-face version of writing a letter, an email, or having a telephone conversation. Most legislators want to meet with citizens from their districts to hear their concerns and recommendations. You only have to be passionate about an issue to get your message across, not an expert lobbyist. Because you hold the power of the vote, your opinions carry more weight than any number of paid lobbyists. Don't be afraid to lobby; it is simply expressing your opinion and trying to convince someone that your view is the correct one.

It may be difficult to set up a meeting during the hectic legislative session, but usually the legislator will take the time if you are willing to travel to the state capitol or Washington D.C. Often you can arrange a meeting while he or she is home as legislators usually schedule times in their districts around holidays or during recesses. [The Michigan legislature is usually in session only on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, so state legislators are often back in their home districts Thursday afternoon through Monday; find out more at <https://legislature.mi.gov>.] Remember that you have several elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels with different decision-making authority. If appropriate, you should contact all of them if they can support your issue.

Arranging the meeting

- Call your legislator's office and make an appointment. Ask to speak with appointments secretary or scheduler.
- Identify yourself as a constituent of the legislator, stating where you live.
- Briefly explain which issue you would like to discuss with the legislator.
- Request a 30-minute meeting with the elected official. You might be given less time, but it doesn't hurt to ask for 30 minutes.
- If the legislator is unavailable, request a meeting with a legislative aide or other staff person who is responsible for or knowledgeable about your issue.
- Send a note or fax to confirm the appointment. Include the time, date and location of the appointment, as well as your name, address and daytime phone number.

Preparing for the meeting

- Gather a small group, if possible, (three is optimum) to accompany you during the meeting. Bring different members of the community, such as a business owner, teacher, doctor, scientist, homemaker, etc. If you are representing a larger group or organization, convey that to the legislator.
- Determine the message you wish to convey before meeting with the legislator. If in a group divide up the tasks of who is the main spokesperson, and who will answer questions on specific topics. Also, assign someone to take notes and to write the follow-up letter. Include brief personal stories or experiences which demonstrate why this issue is important to you or the group. Finally, keep your message brief and clear so that your legislator understands the issue.
- List all arguments for and against the issue and develop responses. This will avoid being put on the spot when the legislator disagrees with your argument.
- Prepare your message in a letter or fact sheet to leave with the legislator. Have other voters or organizations prepare letters of endorsement or other supportive materials. If you wish to convey amendments or revisions to legislation, provide your edited version of the bill. Be brief; if you bury them in paper, they may not read it!
- Familiarize yourself with the legislator's voting record and history. This will help you relate and determine which arguments will be most effective (e.g., animal protection, economic, environmental, religious, etc.).
- Role play your presentation with others who can provide feedback. Practice until you are confident and know the information or message, but do not memorize it. Make sure the information you are presenting is limited enough to allow time for questions and discussion.

During the meeting

- Be on time. Your legislator has a full schedule. Sometimes elected officials may not be on time due to meetings or hearings. Be patient and flexible. If the legislator must leave early, ask to continue the discussion with a staff person.
- Dress nicely. Initial impressions are important in this setting and a good one can only help your message.
- Relax. Do not feel that you need to be an expert. All that matters is that you are an intelligent citizen with voting power. Your best tool will be to show how genuine your concern is for the issue.
- Introduce yourself and everyone in your group, and identify your organization.
- Make eye contact. This shows confidence. Speak with authority and remember that your legislator (or the staff person) is a person too.
- Begin with a compliment, such as stating how good his or her voting record is. If you can't do that, at least begin by thanking the legislator for taking the time to meet with you.
- Make your opening remarks a brief and clear description of the issue. State your position on it and what you want the elected official to do. If legislation is involved, state the bill number, name, and sponsors.
- Watch body language as it can often reveal more than the discussion.
- If you lose your train of thought or get flustered, pull out your fact sheet to refresh your mind or let another member of the group pick up the discussion.
- After presenting your message, let the legislator respond. Listen carefully. Have another member of your group take notes so you can focus on what the legislator is saying.
- Answer the legislator's questions as best you can. Don't make up answers. Acknowledge what you do not know. Make a note of the questions you could not answer and tell the legislator you will follow up with answers.
- Keep the discussion focused on the message you are there to convey. If the discussion gets off course, steer it back to the issue.
- Be firm about your position, but don't try to change the legislator's mind. Be courteous, direct and fair. Ensure that no personal remarks are made. If you are not seeing eye-to-eye with the legislator and are frustrated, move on to another part of the issue or politely end the meeting. It is important not to alienate the legislator since you may need his or her support on another issue.
- Ask for your legislator's support by speaking out on the floor about the bill, or voting for or against the bill, unless he or she is clearly opposed to the issue.
- Remember to leave the legislator *and* the staff a copy of your fact sheets, letters, or other information.
- Thank the legislator or staff member for his or her time, even if no agreement was reached on the issue.

After the meeting

- Immediately take notes regarding the main points of discussion, the legislator's remarks, any unanswered questions, etc.
- Complete your research to find information for unanswered questions.
- Promptly follow up with a written thank you letter or an email. Use this to restate your key points, respond to outstanding questions, and reiterate any commitments the legislator made.