

FEDERAL ADVOCACY IN AUGUST

Congress annually breaks from all legislative activity during the month of August to allow for time in home states and congressional districts in order to connect with constituents and potential voters. Typically they will hold Town Hall meetings or participate in local civic events. As a result, August provides an ideal time to meet with your Members of Congress locally, saving both time and money compared to scheduling the same meeting in Washington, DC. Take advantage of this opportunity to reinforce the importance of county issues, thank them for items accomplished and request action needed before the end of the First Session of the 115th Congress.

Any legislation not signed into law before the end of the First Session will roll over to the Second Session. Additionally, the federal appropriations process is frequently not completed by August, so funding levels for the next fiscal year on which county governments rely are not finalized. Therefore, meetings held locally during the August Recess are extremely timely and hearing from local elected officials can often change the minds of federal lawmakers. Meeting personally outside of DC also helps you develop, improve and maintain important, personal and political relationships with your Members of Congress.

GETTING STARTED:

- Call the office located nearest to you. Some offices have different staff for scheduling appointments in the state than those who handle the scheduling for DC meetings. However, also be prepared to be directed to the DC office. It depends on the individual Member how it is handled.
- You may be asked to submit the request by email or fill out a form online.
- Provide names, titles and possible times for an appointment.
- Explain the topics you plan to raise during the meeting, so the Member can come prepared.
- Ask which staff will join the meeting. Staff are typically assigned an issue-specific portfolio, so it helps to make contact with the appropriate staffer should any follow-up action be necessary.
- Consider inviting your Member of Congress to your location if you plan to meet with more than one local elected official and staff leadership.
- Check in with the scheduler a week before the meeting to confirm date, time and location.
- Verify with the scheduler the amount of time allocated for the meeting. That will allow you to set realistic expectations on how much ground you will be able to cover during the meeting.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE:

- Research ahead of time how your Member has voted on the key issues you plan to discuss.
- Re-familiarize yourself on their committee and subcommittee assignments, as well as any special interests he/she has, such as participation in any of the Congressional Caucuses.
- A quick review of the Member's website or through internet searches will reveal a lot of useful information. Look for common interests (i.e. hobbies, alma mater, family, etc.).
- Although the preferred meeting is always elected official to elected official, if that is not possible ask for the District Director.

- Members of Congress rely heavily on their staff for advice and recommendations, so building a strong working relationship with a staff person can often be just as valuable as direct contact with the Member. Treat any meeting with staff the same as you would with the elected official in terms of preparation and presentation.

BE PREPARED:

- Review your materials and talking points ahead of time, and send relevant information to the appropriate staffer in advance of the meeting if possible. You will have a more substantive conversation if all parties are fully prepared.
- Be sure to include personal stories and cite local examples to make a compelling case. Avoid colloquial statements and instead back your statements with proven data.
- Be prepared to discuss specific legislation in play that can accomplish the priority.
- Tell the Member who else supports your position or policy. Share a list of stakeholder endorsements any time you can and letters of support if possible.
- Take extra copies of handouts to be left behind.
- Have plenty of business cards to hand out.

KNOW THE ASK:

- Begin and end the meeting with an explanation or reminder of your county's legislative concerns and what you are asking the Member of Congress to do.
- The request for action may be different from one Member of Congress to the other depending on the person's committee position, political affiliation or voting record.
- Ask the Member for feedback on the challenges and opportunities they see for legislative action on the priority. You can learn a lot by asking for their insight. (ex., Why is the bill stalled? Is there a specific Member or group holding it up?)
- Do not assume the public official's position based just on their political party. Members of Congress do not always follow the party line if it is important to their voters; they can and often will change their minds if given good reasons for a new position.
- Do not discuss fundraising or political grievances during advocacy meetings. Stick to the issues and why they are important to your county and the voters you share with your Members of Congress.

FOLLOW-UP:

- It is fine not to have all the answers. If you promise to get back to someone with an answer, make sure to do so.
- Take photos during the meeting and post them on your social media sites.
- Kindly offer your photos to their staff. They may want to post it to their own social media site.
- Send a thank you note to everyone you met with regardless of whether you are supplying additional information or not.
- Provide useful feedback to NCACC's public policy staff.
- Don't give up. The policy making process can take a long time, often years.

Strategics Consulting is a federal government relations firm with more than 25 years of experience and serves as a consultant to NCACC. For more information on how Strategics can help your county turn challenges into achievements, contact Leslie Mazingo at (202) 255-5760 or leslie@strategics.consulting.