

A GUIDE TO

**VISITING
YOUR
ELECTED
OFFICIAL'S
OFFICE**

2017

Organizing for Action

VISITING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL'S OFFICE

The ultimate goal of organizing around the issues you care about is to persuade elected officials to support your position on those issues. We use a variety of tactics to achieve this goal—one of the most effective being an in-person visit to an elected official's office. Meeting face-to-face with an elected official or his/her staff is your opportunity to share your story with the people who represent you in making policy decisions. This guide will help you prep for your office visit and ensure your time with your elected official or his/her staff is as effective and efficient as possible.

Why visit your elected official

Visiting an elected official's office and speaking with him or her might seem like a job for someone else. Here's the thing, though: Elected officials want to hear from you. They make decisions based on what they hear from their constituents. Speaking directly with your elected officials in person puts the issue you care about on their radar. Meeting with them in person also helps you build a relationship with them and their staff, which is the first step in building trust and gaining their ear.

Think about it this way: If elected officials don't hear anything about the issue you care about, they don't know people need them to make it a priority.

I. PREPARING TO VISIT YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

Choosing who you should visit

Elected officials make decisions about the issue you care about; however, not all issues come across the desks of all elected leaders and not all elected leaders are open to your position on an issue. Use these three questions to help determine which elected leader(s) you should target, set a realistic goal for your visit, and select the proper tactic to move your issue forward:

Is your issue handled at the local, state, or national level? Visiting the office of the right elected official is key to moving your issue forward. Does the issue you care about impact your immediate community? If so, this might be an issue best handled by your city council member, mayor, or other

local official. Conversely, a big issue such as the Affordable Care Act is best handled by state or national elected officials. Learn more about how to find out which level of government handles your issue in the guide in the next section!

What is the goal of your visit? Research your elected leader’s position on the issue they care about. Are they on the fence about the issue and potentially open to hearing your position? If so, you’ll want to pay a visit to that elected official’s office to persuade them to support your side. For elected officials who already support your position, visit their office to say thank you and ask them to continue supporting the issue—they do not often hear this! If the elected official is vehemently opposed to your stance on the issue, persuading them otherwise might not be the most effective use of your time. In this case, a visit to express your disappointment is valid, so long as you are cordial and positive. Learn more about how to find out your elected official’s stance on your issue in the guide in the next section.

Which tactic should you use? There are three types of office visits:

1 Drop-in Visit

A **drop-in visit** is when an individual stops in to express their stance on an issue. Because office visits should show elected officials that an abundance of people in a community stand with you on a given issue, drop-ins are most effective when they occur in a steady stream throughout the day or a period of days. Pro-tip: Be sure to sign in with the staff and log the issue you came to talk about. Leave some material about your issue, too.

2 Sit-down Meeting with a Staffer

A **sit-down meeting with a staffer** should be scheduled in advance, be attended by at least a handful of people, and should have an agenda. This is your opportunity to ask staffers about the elected official’s position, discuss concerns about the issue at hand, show community support for the issue, and to share meaningful personal stories about how this issue impacts constituents. The elected official’s staff play a considerable role in shaping political decisions, so talking with staff is a great way to influence the decision maker.

3 Sit-down Meeting with an Elected Official

A **sit-down meeting with the elected official** should follow the same structure as a sit-down meeting with staff, but it is an opportunity to talk to and hear from the elected official directly. This is a powerful opportunity to directly influence the elected official’s view on an issue.

Learning more about your elected officials

Use this chart to help you find the elected officials who represent you, how to get in touch with them for your office visit, and what they've said in the past about the issue you care about.



Federal level:

Represented by one congressman or woman and two senators

Every Congressman and Senator has a website—after you find out who represents you at the federal level, find their official website to review their stances on the issues, office locations, phone numbers, and email addresses.

[FIND YOUR CONGRESSMAN](#)

[FIND YOUR SENATORS](#)



State level:

Represented by a governor and a legislative body

State governments are organized differently based on each state's constitution. That said, each state has a governor and a legislative body that makes laws for all citizens of that state. Your governor is your state's highest ranking official—her responsibilities include, among many other duties, signing bills into law and ensuring the laws are carried out. State legislatures are the law-making bodies of each state's government. Each state (except Nebraska) has two separate chambers or houses: the Senate, which is the smaller chamber, and the House of Representatives or Assembly, which is the larger chamber.

[FIND YOUR GOVERNOR](#)

[FIND YOUR LEGISLATORS](#)



Local level:

The structure of local government varies greatly, so search online to find out how it works, who represents you, and how to contact them at the local level.

Below the state level, there are counties and municipalities that generally take responsibility for parks and recreation services, police and fire departments, housing services, emergency medical services, municipal courts, transportation services (including public transportation), and public works (streets, sewers, snow removal, signage, and so forth).

Now that you know this, you should feel prepared to find out not only which official you will be visiting, but how to contact them as well. Next, we will talk about the different kinds of office visits you can use when visiting your elected official.

Talking about your issue effectively (You don't need to be an expert.)

We are always most effective when we talk about our issue by combining key facts, values, and personal stories.

Key facts can be statistics or other concrete figures that support your case. You don't need to be an expert to talk to your elected officials. Memorizing a few key facts, however, supports your case and will make it even more compelling. Furthermore, one way to make key facts even more compelling is to make them local to the area your elected official represents. Make sure you come prepared with key facts from credible, independent sources that you can share with your elected official on your issue of focus.

Values are deeply held beliefs, which transcend issues or political affiliations, that can serve as a bridge between individuals—even if they're divided on an issue, they often support the same outcomes. Some examples of values held dear by many Americans are that all people are created equal, that hard work and responsibility should be rewarded, and that we all must play a role in creating a better future for the next generation. It's important to connect with your elected official on your values—they provide common ground for you and your elected official to discuss what is best for the community, even in the face of disagreement around the solutions to your issue. You should think of your stance on an issue as policy you wish to be implemented that are based on a common set of values.

Personal stories are examples of how a specific issue has impacted your life. They're one of the most powerful tools we have for winning others over on the issues, because stories allow us to put a human face on the issue, making it less abstract and more accessible. For example, if you have children and live in a coastal city, and your issue is climate change, you might tell a story about your growing concern that rising sea levels could displace your family or even your children or grandchildren.

In some cases, you may find it difficult to respond to statements made by your elected officials or their staff in opposition to your issue. It's OK if you're not sure how to respond to these points. It's crucial to remember to bring the conversation back to the values, personal stories, and key facts that drive you to fight for this issue.

Now that we have covered what you need to do to prepare, you should feel empowered to visit your elected official. In the next section, we'll provide some resources to make sure your office visit is successful.

II. EXECUTING YOUR OFFICE VISIT

Visiting your elected official

We have talked about why it's important to visit your elected officials, as well as covered steps to prepare for your visit. But let's consider for a moment that you're now on your way—what's on your agenda? How will you amplify your visit? These are questions we will address in this section.

Sample agenda for a sit-down meeting

While we have talked about how you should prepare, you're probably still wondering about what the play-by-play of an office visit looks like. Though several people should attend a sit-down meeting, one person should lead the conversation. Below is a sample agenda you may use and modify for your meeting.

PART 1: Introductions

- Introduce those who are in the room, including any organizational affiliations they have.
- Explain the purpose of the visit: to talk about a given issue, find out where the elected official stands, and identify the best way to move this issue forward.

PART 2: The issue

- Ask the elected official or staff:
 - What is the elected official's stance on this issue?
 - What are the elected official's concerns about it?
- Address the elected official's concerns using examples from your own experience and the key statistics you researched.
- Explain why the meeting attendees support your position on the issue.
 - Call on a few meeting attendees with compelling stories to share why they support your position on the issue. It's not always necessary, but having a relevant expert voice as part of the conversation can also be beneficial. This person could be from a partner group or local university, for example.
 - Remember that the most effective way to discuss the issues is by combining key facts, values, and personal stories (see the "Talking about your issue effectively" section above for more information).

PART 3: Next steps

- Offer to send follow-up information that addresses the elected official's concerns.
- Use this meeting as an opportunity to build your chapter's relationship with the office—ask for a follow-up meeting to discuss the issue further.
- Remind the staffer that your group will be excited to thank the elected official should they come out in support of this issue.

Tactics to amplify your office visit

Office visits primarily serve to put your support for the issue onto your elected official's radar. However, another key part of any issue campaign strategy is to shape a public narrative that support for your issue is broad in your community. Remember to make sure your office visit is publicized to the greatest degree possible, so that you have a chance to win over the general public and add your voice to a broader chorus of voices fighting for the issue.

Take plenty of photos. Every office operates with different rules; some will allow you to take photos inside, and others will not. Make sure to follow the rules of the office, but if possible, take as many photos as you can to document your visit. If photos are not allowed inside, take some outside the office door, ideally where the name of the elected official is visible, as a way to document your visit. Make sure to be considerate of others when taking photos.

Consider earned media. Depending on the situation, earned media may be an appropriate and strategic way to amplify your office visit to the broader public. There are many factors to consider when deciding whether an event is media worthy—for some general guidelines on this, consult [OFA's Earned Media Guide](#). As with photos, the press may or may not be allowed in elected officials' offices. If press is not allowed, but you still consider your visit media worthy, consider hosting a short press conference outside the office before or after the visit. To keep the tenor positive, consider notifying the elected official's office if you'll be inviting members of the press.

Remember that amplifying your organizing activities is a key part of issue advocacy. Try to follow this mantra: Pics, or it didn't happen.

III. AFTER YOUR OFFICE VISIT

After your office visit, you'll want to make sure you amplify the work that you did. There are a few key ways to make sure you share your best practices, as well as share your successes and challenges, with your community members and organizers across the country.

Post the story of your visit on Connect. Share your wrap-up in your local/state and National groups on Connect. Be sure to give some background on the issue you're working on, where you're working, some photos from your visit, and your favorite anecdotes from the visit.

Amplify the visit online. Use social media—especially Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—to summarize the event as a whole, thank those who participated, and reinforce the overall message of the event. These posts should include photos, and can also include a call to take further action in the future, whether you want to promote an upcoming event or other ways to get involved online.

Thank your elected official and their staff. Don't forget to take a moment to thank the office for hosting you and hearing your position.