

Guidelines for Legislative Visitations

A letter-writing campaign is only the introductory contact in the advocacy process. The follow-up visit to the legislator's local or state office begins the process of educating the legislator and influencing him or her to support our efforts for recognition.

State elected officials are from, and usually remain a part of, the local general public. These people have ventured into politics because they want to accomplish good things and often have particular issues or viewpoints they wish to promote. They understand that their constituents also have important ideas and issues and do not like to say "no" to any constituent requests. It is financial reality that forces them to set priorities which permit support of only a limited number.

To become one of those chosen, an issue must catch the legislator's attention and have influence. Four ways for an issue to catch a legislator's attention and have influence are included below.

Money

Re-election needs money. Since we are not offering financial incentives, this is not of interest to us.

Personal Interest

A legislator will support what he or she truly believes in or can relate to, especially if there is a personal connection. Point out that our therapy is beneficial to many of his or her constituents at all of life's stages and may, on some occasion, touch the legislator personally. To highlight how many clients are in the area, mention the number of local therapists in the legislative district and what client populations they serve. Give examples of the settings, naming a few specific facilities, where the legislator's constituents are receiving services. The legislator may know someone connected with a facility as either an employee or a patient. Make it personal.

Constituents

Truly heart-felt communications from a constituent will influence a legislator's vote. A constituent with solid information who has personal conviction and belief can tell the story of the issue with a sense of commitment. Communications from clients and their families telling their story is very important. Just as compelling is to hear from those who want services but are not able to access services either because there is not a therapist available or they are not able to afford it.

Good Press

Good press and publicity are the basis for a successful re-election campaign. They also assure the elected official that he or she is popular and the constituents are happy. Suggest a local newspaper article detailing the ways in which the legislator has supported and promoted our therapy. A photo of the legislator and the therapist would be a bonus. This is a prime opportunity for you as the therapist to write a community awareness article that will receive greater visibility due to the political connection.

The web site for Families USA, www.familiesusa.org has a section entitled "Tools For Advocates, which provides some very helpful information. One section dealing with visiting legislators in their home district offers pointers for visiting a federal legislator. These basic principles are also applicable to state legislators.

During the meeting:

Present your case. Explain what you want your legislator to do and why.

Give examples of the impact the proposed legislation will have on your home state or district.

If you don't know the answer to a question, don't make it up. Offer to find out and send information back to the office later.

Keep control of the visit. Don't be put off by smokescreens or long-winded answers.

Don't confront, threaten, pressure, or beg.

Leave a brief position paper or fact sheet with the member when you leave.

Follow up your visit with a thank you note.

You can also invite your elected officials to participate in your organization's activities. You might ask them to address your group or present them with an award. These events leave a lasting, positive impression about the organization and build a relationship with the legislator that can be useful.