



CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY ON CAPITOL HILL

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

ADVOCACY = “EDUCATION” + “PERSUASION”

[Lobbying = Education + Advocacy]

Advocacy Involves: Educating, informing, and persuading policymakers about an issue, project, or policy priority. Advocacy can be as simple as a brief conversation or office visit, or as detailed as providing analysis of how legislation or policy could positively or negatively affect a project, community, industry, or public interest. Advocacy includes not only supporting or opposing legislation, but also building relationships, sharing expertise, and helping policymakers understand why an issue matters.

Advocacy May Include:

- Building a relationship with your Members of Congress and their staff.
- Issue identification, research, and analysis.
- Persuasively connecting the merits of an issue to the political self-interest of the Member.)
- Lobbying/advocating for or against legislation.
- Consensus building among groups of legislators and outside interests.

Advocacy and legislative lobbying are grounded in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting ... the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” These protections support the freedom to engage in public policy advocacy, including legislative lobbying.

WHY ADVOCACY?

Advocacy Is Important and Helpful to Congressional Committees, Members, and Their Staff.

Advocacy is important because Members of Congress and their staff are dealing with a huge range of issues, and they are not experts in all of them. Even very good staff are often

responsible for multiple issue areas at once, and their knowledge may be broad but not deep, especially when it comes to a specific project, policy, or local concern.

That is why advocacy matters. It is how constituents and stakeholders help educate congressional offices about what an issue is, why it matters, and what is at stake. If an office does not understand the issue, the history behind it, or the real-world consequences, it is much harder for them to engage in a useful way.

Advocacy is also important because turnover on Capitol Hill is high. Unless you have worked with an office repeatedly, you should not assume staff already know your issue. They may be hearing about it for the first time, or they may know just enough to be dangerous. A good advocate meets them where they are, asks what they already know, and is prepared to step back and explain the issue clearly.

That explanation should not stay at the 30,000-foot level. It should connect the issue to the Member's district or state. Why does this matter to their communities, their economy, their ports, their flood risk, their water supply, their jobs, or their supply chains? If the project or infrastructure is outside the district or state, then the advocate needs to be ready to explain the direct and indirect benefits and why that Member should still care.

Committee staff, particularly senior committee staff, may have more background on a topic than personal office staff, but they still do not know everything. They still need credible, concise, and practical information from people who understand the issue. Good advocates become trusted resources by bringing facts, context, and real examples, not just opinions.

Advocacy is not only about persuading Congress. It is also about building relationships, sharing information, and helping offices understand both the substance of an issue and why it matters in practical and political terms. Members and staff can also provide insight into timing, process, and what may or may not be realistic. When done well, advocacy helps both sides.

TIPS FOR BEING AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE.

1) Target Your Congressional Members. You need to target both the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate. Plan to contact and “educate” Congressional Members, Committee Chairmen, and staff regarding your issues/projects.

2) Do Not Limit Outreach to Friendly Offices. You need to talk to and work with *both* sides, including the Majority *and* Minority. You also should contact and educate Members that might

not be “friendly” to your issues. You need to work *both* the House *and* Senate side. And you should work with *both* the Authorizing *and* Appropriations Committees.

3) Prepare for the Meeting. Get to know your audience. Educate yourself on the Members and their interests, including by reviewing their party affiliation, biographies, legislative initiatives, stance on major issues, and Committee assignments. It also is important to understand where your issue is likely to be heard in Congress. Committee websites can help explain committee jurisdiction and issue areas. If a bill has already been introduced, Congress.gov will identify the committee or committees to which it has been referred. If legislation has not yet been introduced and you are unsure where it may be heard, consider reaching out to relevant national associations or others working on the issue. Before your meeting with legislators or their staff, determine your “asks” and the desired outcomes of the meeting. Develop a clear, concise message, and prepare leave-behind briefing materials in advance. Anticipate questions and have answers ready. Do not assume that the office already knows your issue well. Unless you have worked with the staff repeatedly, ask about their familiarity with the issue and be prepared to step back and explain it clearly. Choreograph the meeting ahead of time, including planing who will say what, etc.

What do “Majority” and “Minority” mean?

In Congress, the **majority** is the party with the most members in a chamber, and the **minority** is the other party. These labels also apply to committees and staff. The majority generally controls the chamber or committee agenda, but minority Members and staff can still be important voices and valuable contacts on an issue.

4) Make Clear and Measurable “Asks” in the Meeting. When in the meeting, be prepared to raise their awareness and understanding of the issues, and make clear, concise, and measurable “asks.” Provide legislators/staff with the information they need to take actionable steps, including giving them specific, measurable recommendations. Personalize your message, and highlight the importance of the issues—both to them and you. Emphasize how it affects their constituencies, political self-interest, etc., so they are thinking about the issue. Be credible, including understanding the issue you want to advocate for or against; always tell the truth; and never promise more than you can deliver. Bring briefing materials, visual aids, and any other supplemental leave-behind materials.

5) Follow-Up. Following the meeting, you should send a follow-up thank-you email. Summarize the meeting (including “asks”), and respond to any Member and staff concerns. Provide any additional or follow-up information you promised. Consider providing any leave-

behind materials in electronic form. Be sure to maintain ongoing communications with the office and offer to serve as a resource for them.

6) Do Reinforcement. It is important to communicate periodically with the office over time, to stay on their radar screen. (They are dealing with a flood of issues, so “once a year” does *not* cut it.) Develop and maintain relationships. There is a lot of staff turnover in congressional offices, so it is important to refresh or re-establish your contacts.

7) Be Flexible. Schedules may change at the last minute in Congress, so it is important that you remain flexible in case a Member gets pulled away at the last moment. And be prepared to get your message across clearly, concisely, and quickly, so that, you can ensure you have addressed your key points.

8) Be Prepared for Hard Work. Congressional offices are handling many issues with limited staff time and resources. That means advocates often need to serve as the boots on the ground, helping track developments, provide information, follow up, and keep the issue moving. Congressional offices can be important partners, but there is no substitute for preparation, persistence, and follow-through by the advocate.

9) Utilize Influential Supporters. Elicit the support of, and coordinate with, potential public and private sector allies who are influential with officials (possibly including your local or regional government officials, businesses, state officials, similar interest groups, etc.).

10) Reach Out to Federal Agencies. You may want or need to reach out to and work with relevant federal agencies, to gain their support, too.

BOTTOM LINE.

All policy issues and projects begin as an idea, and it’s our responsibility as constituents and advocates to elevate those ideas and projects to the Congressional level to inform and impact change. The tips laid out above are important to keep in mind any time you are interacting with Congressional officials or their staff. When you are well-organized, coordinated, and committed, you can accomplish a lot.