



# ACLU-PA Guide to Meeting with Your Legislator

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## Meeting Preparation

**Identify your main message.** Time is often limited (and meetings may get interrupted). Focus on one or two main issues and be prepared to express your views succinctly and clearly.

**Determine roles for participants.** Identify who will cover each component of the meeting.

**Learn more about the legislator in advance.** What is the legislator's background: upbringing, education, work history, family? What sort of ties does the legislator have to local organizations? Are there interests or experiences you have in common or that may be relevant to the position you're advocating?

**Be ready to meet with staff.** Don't be disappointed if you meet with staff instead of your legislator. Key staff aides are often more familiar with specific policy issues and are in the best position to listen to your point of view and subsequently advise the legislator of your concerns at precisely the right moment.

**Bring a "leave-behind" document.** Give the legislator a brief fact sheet (one to two pages) that outlines your position and explains what the bill does (if there is one) and why he or she should support your viewpoint. Also, feel free to bring a personal or business card with your contact information to leave with a staffer.

## At the Meeting

**BE ON TIME.**

**Dress nicely.** Business attire is appropriate.

**Introduce yourself.** Tell your legislator or staff person your name, where you are from, and that you are a constituent. If you represent an organization, note its name, where the group is located, and the size of its membership. If you are associated with a specific institution, identify it and your field of study. If you have any family, social, organizational or other ties to the legislator, mention them as well.

**Start with a compliment.** If possible, thank the legislator for their support on a prior issue or for their participation in a community event. At a minimum, thank them for meeting with you.

## The "Ask"

**State your position.** State clearly and concisely what issue you want to discuss, what your position is, and what action you want the member to take. Follow this with facts about why he or she should support your position.

**Ask a direct question.** Ask a question to which the legislator can respond "yes" or "no." For example, "Can we count on you to oppose this bill?" Press politely for a commitment, unless the member is clearly opposed to your position or to making a commitment.

**Make a local or personal connection.** Stress how the issue will affect the legislator's district or state and, if possible, tell a personal story that highlights your experience with the issue and why you care about it.

**Mention other supporters.** Inform the legislator about other organizations, important individuals, government officials and legislators who support your position. If you are working with a coalition, mention other coalition members. This will demonstrate broad-based support for your cause.

**Volunteer to be a resource contact.** Legislators and their staff will always welcome a constituent who is knowledgeable on specific issues and is willing to be a local contact (or willing to help identify other local contacts) who can give them advice on short notice.

**Invite the legislator to visit your organization.** Legislators will welcome the opportunity to participate in community events, especially where they may visit with their constituents. Events with press coverage are especially appealing to elected officials.

**THANK THE LEGISLATOR.** Always thank the legislator for his or her time at the end of the meeting, even if he or she did not agree with your position.

## Conversation Tips

**Be a good listener.** After you make your pitch, allow the legislator to respond. Bring the conversation back to the issue at hand if he or she goes off on a tangent or tries to evade your position.

**Don't answer what you don't know.** It's okay to not know all the answers. Answer questions to the best of your ability, and if you don't know an answer, admit it. This ensures you maintain credibility and it provides an opportunity for a relevant follow-up letter to provide any additional information.

**Be confident, but refrain from lecturing.** There's no one "right" way to talk with an elected official. Use these guidelines, but trust your instincts, be flexible and have fun.

## The Don'ts

- Don't talk about campaign contributions
- Don't talk about unrelated controversial political issues
- Don't tell the legislator or staff that you voted for his or her opponent
- Don't argue over policy issues. If the legislator disagrees with your position, agree to disagree for the moment and move on to your next topic. You can always follow up with a letter explaining your views in further detail.

## After the Meeting

**Write down your impressions.** Immediately after the meeting, write down any information you learned about the legislator's position or concerns.

**Follow up.** Always follow up with a prompt thank you letter. In the letter, reiterate your key points and any commitments the legislator made to you. If you met with staff, send them a thank you note as well and send a separate letter to the legislator informing them of the meeting you had with their staff, the issues you discussed and your views on them. Include all follow-up information you promised to provide.