

DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS AND POLICYMAKERS

It is not only necessary to understand the legislative process, but good practice to establish a personal relationship with your congressman, state elected officials and policymakers, or other policymaker who affects the policies with which you may be concerned. Organizations and associations should be knowledgeable about the political points of view, backgrounds and personalities of those persons who can and do influence and create policy. Do your homework. Basic knowledge of your elected officials and policymakers or other elected official can pay off in the future.

When beginning, it is important to know some basic facts about your elected officials and policymakers or the elected official you want to contact. Questions to check on include:

- What kind of constituency does the elected officials and policymakers come from – rural, urban, or suburban?
- What are the principal influences there – labor, business, government?
- What is his or her background, i.e., education, previous experience, etc.?
- What kind of political ties does the elected officials and policymakers have to the party organization?
- What is the nature of the funding for the elected official and/or policymakers' campaigns?
- Who or what influences the elected official and/ policymakers the most?
- What were the winning margins of previous elections?
- Does the elected official or policymaker have any personal experience with AD/HD? With disability? With children's health issues?

Answers to these questions will provide you with information on how vulnerable they may be if they take a stand on your issue.

GETTING TO KNOW THE ELECTED OFFICIALS AND POLICYMAKERS:

One of the keys to becoming an effective advocate is to establish and maintain an ongoing relationship that creates an open line of communication with the elected officials and

policymakers. It is important for elected officials and/or policymakers to feel that they can contact you for your comments on an issue just as you feel free to contact them to express your point of view.

If you have never had the opportunity to meet your elected officials and/or policymakers, try to make your first encounter with them during the time when they are not in “session” and are back home in their area. Take the time to gather some background information on each elected official and/or policymaker with whom you are planning to meet. Find out about his or her interests and concerns by reading newspapers from their home town. Determine what individuals or special interest groups have made large contributions to his or her campaign. (Campaign contribution lists are public information and are usually available through the Secretary of State’s Office at your state capitol.) Examine the elected officials and policymaker’s voting record on issues similar to yours. (Voting records are also on file – check out the website for your state legislature.)

Opportunities to meet your elected officials and policymakers could include:

- Attending a town hall meeting and introducing yourself as a constituent.
- Scheduling a personal meeting when he or she is available in the community.
- Attending “open” official functions where you can be seen and express your interest in the elected officials and/or policymaker’s work.
- Inviting the elected officials and policymakers to your support group meeting to meet with you, the group and/or organization.
- Inviting the elected officials and policymakers to speak at your group’s meeting.

Relationships can develop quickly through meetings such as these. These informal meetings can lead to opportunities which may permit the discussion of issues that could affect your family and members of your organization.

THE ELECTED OFFICIALS AND POLICYMAKER’S STAFF:

Although only the Representatives and Senators actually cast the legislative votes, never underestimate the importance of their staff. Assume that most of your contacts with legislative offices will be with staff members rather than the elected officials and/or policymakers. Develop and cultivate a good rapport with both the district office and Capitol office staff, and let them know what issues are of interest to you. It has been said that the invisible force in American lawmaking is the staff, including personal, committee and/or sub-

committee. Demonstrate that you give reliable information so you will be viewed as a dependable resource. Knowing the important staff person(s) is a key element in becoming an effective advocate.

Rules of care you may want to consider when working with an elected official and/or policymaker's staff include:

- *Remember who they are.*
Staff members will be key figures in developing policy that can affect your constituents.
- *Be considerate of legislative staff persons.*
Most offices in a capitol building are extremely crowded. Do not expect to find space in legislative offices to “park” your luggage or to work while you wait for meetings. Do not ask staff members to take messages for you. Although you may have several unfilled hours before your next appointment, these individuals all have pressing tasks to complete. Finally, do not expect to socialize with or be entertained by legislative staff for extended periods of time.
- *Do not overestimate what the staffer may know.*
Staff members often require outside assistance and the information you can provide to them. Remember - staff have to cover many different issues.
- *Do not underestimate their influence.*
Elected officials and policymakers trust them, depend on them and act on their suggestions.
- *Be honest.*
Provide accurate, complete information to maintain your credibility.
- *Provide summarized, useful information.*
Be concise, brief and to the point. A pro and con analysis may be appropriate if it keeps to the main points. More information can always be requested by the staff should they need further clarification.
- *Visit them before asking for a favor.*
Get acquainted and create a regular line of communication. Do not send needless chatter or become a mail “pest”.
- *Do not hesitate to seek their opinions but do not ever attack their ideas.*
Be prepared to offer alternative ideas or proposals for their consideration.

- *Do say “I Don’t Know” when appropriate.*

When asked a question that you are not sure about, let the elected official, policymaker or staff person know that you don’t have the answer immediately, but will find out and get back to him with the answer. Then it is essential to follow up. CHADD can help you get answers to respond to their questions.

It pays to know the staff members. The friendship you establish with an aide or staff person may ultimately result in reaching the elected officials and policymakers. They have the access to the power structure and the capacity to influence the decision-making process!

PREPARING TO MEET WITH AN ELECTED OFFICIAL AND/OR POLICYMAKER:

The following are suggested steps in preparing to meet with an elected officials and policymakers.

- *Develop a specific proposal.*
Identify the problem to be addressed and formulate suggested solutions. If you believe a statute should be changed, know it by number, and if possible, offer draft language that would effect the change. If you are working toward agency rule or policy changes, know which agency and which rules or policies you are targeting. Structure possible compromise positions in advance and be willing to listen to and understand opposing views.
- *Prepare written material about your issue to leave with the person or persons to whom you are making your presentation.*
These items should be concise and neatly typed. Your goal should be to gain their interest and then to communicate your ideas cogently but as succinctly as possible.
 - Material can be provided in several different formats. In one format, include background information and statistical data along with your recommendations or proposals. Inform staff members and elected officials and/or policymakers with whom you are working that you have this type of document available for their use. This format might be supplied to key staff people if they express a desire for more detail about your issue.
 - The second format would include a summary of your findings and recommendations in enough detail to explain your rationale but not burden the elected officials and policymakers with statistical information. Highlighting your most salient points by using

different colors or bolder type can help draw the attention of your reader. Illustrating your ideas with pictures or graphs can convey your information “*at a glance.*” Remember that legislative audiences have limited time and are often bombarded with an overwhelming amount of printed materials.

- ➔ A third format can merely list your recommendations or your most important points. Be sure to indicate that additional information is available, and tell where and from whom it may be obtained. In general, when communicating with elected officials and/or policymakers, it may be desirable to illustrate your ideas in simple terms using actual examples from the individual’s geographic area if possible. Remember that elected officials and/or policymakers are most frequently concerned with the impact your proposals would have on “*real people.*”

- *Make an effort to inform yourself about any opposition to your proposal from other elected officials and/or policymakers and prepare arguments to counteract it.*

You can severely damage your credibility by announcing that there is not opposition when you know there is.

- *If the implementation of your proposal is going to cost money, be prepared to propose a funding mechanism.*

Would you advocate a new fee or new taxes? Are you proposing to divert funds from another program? If so, which one and why?

- *If you believe your proposal will be cost-effective or even save money, be prepared to explain how this will happen.*

- *Understand the extent and nature of the issues the elected official and/or policymaker with whom you will be meeting must address, and analyze how your request fits into this larger scope.*

- *Observe the members in action at hearings or committee meetings if you have an opportunity to do so.*

- *Be patient and maintain a positive attitude.*

Abusive, critical, or insulting approaches toward the people you hope to influence favorably regarding your cause can have the opposite effect. Don’t ruin your chances for a good rapport with an individual elected official or policymakers.

- *Express appreciation for elected official's efforts and an understanding of their limitations.*
- *Unless you have frequent contact with an elected official and/or policymaker, don't expect him or her to remember your name.*
As you greet the elected officials and policymakers, remind him or her of your name and the issue on which you are working.
- *Don't threaten or try to bargain with any elected official or policymaker by promising to deliver or withhold blocks of votes at the polls based on.*
This approach is generally not well-received among elected officials. Besides, it is extremely difficult to follow through on such a bargain.
- *The support of officials who have endorsed your issues previously should never be taken for granted.*
Individuals representing the opposition will likely be providing them with information on the other point of view. While you may not need to spend an inordinate amount of time advocating with the elected officials and/or policymakers who routinely support your cause, it is a good idea to maintain contact with them and to offer information as needed or requested and do so in a timely manner.
- *Simply because an elected official or policymaker's voting record indicates his or her prior opposition to a cause similar to yours, never automatically assume that he or she will refuse to support your current proposal.*
The elected official or policymaker may for some personal reason be responsive to your specific ideas. At least give him or her an opportunity to hear from you the strengths of your position. Be prepared to respond to the concerns you know he or she has previously raised regarding similar or related issues.
- *During your initial visit, it may not be advisable to press elected officials and policymakers for a commitment on your issue.*
His or her eventual support will probably be stronger if it is based on a fully informed opinion. The elected officials and policymakers may appreciate some time to reflect on the issue and to have his or her staff gather additional facts. At the end of the initial visit, it is recommended that you tell the elected officials and policymakers you would appreciate his or her support and that you would be pleased to provide any further information that might be helpful in making his or her decision. It is appropriate to contact the elected officials and policymakers or his or her staff regarding a commitment to support the measure as time draws near for a committee or floor vote.

- *Individual letters relating to an issue under consideration by the legislature can be helpful in your advocacy efforts; however, form letters, emails, and/or post cards do not have as much impact.*

Suggested drafts or outlines developed by groups or organizations for use by their members should always be adapted and tailored by the individual letter writer to reflect their personal concerns and experiences regarding the issue. Remember to put a “*face*” on the issue and that only you can tell your story!