



Legislative Advocacy

Tips for Legislative Advocacy

1. COMMUNICATING TO MEMBERS OF CONGRESS AND THE ADMINISTRATION

Communicating with your members of Congress and Administration officials is the most important advocacy step you can take. You may want to follow these tips:

The most important voice is your own — Lobbying is most effective when done by constituents. Immigration issues are complex, and often the easiest way for elected officials and their staff to understand the policy changes needed is through real-life examples.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate — It takes just minutes to pick up the phone, put pen to paper, or log onto e-mail and let your representatives in Washington, DC know how you feel about the issue you care about. While this communication is often used to ask them to support policy or defeat harmful legislation, also remember to thank legislators when they act on your wishes or take a position you agree with.

Some elected officials have consistent anti-immigrant policy positions, or don't communicate much on these issues. It is important to contact these officials, and let them know that his/her constituents are supportive of immigrants' rights. While you may not be successful in convincing them that your position is correct, it is important to create the space for dialogue and for him/her to hear your perspective. Education and politics can, over time, change people's minds.

In addition, you may also want to voice your opinion to Congressional leadership and key committee members. These leaders are responsible for setting national policy and should be responsive to a broader sampling of public opinion. The committee with jurisdiction over many immigration issues is the Judiciary Committee (in both the House and Senate) and, by extension, the Immigration Subcommittee of the Judiciary. However, many other committees and subcommittees have jurisdiction over legislation that impacts immigrants in the U.S. If you are unsure, look up the bill by number at <http://thomas.loc.gov> and check the remarks under "Status" to see which committees have received copies of the bill for consideration.

2. MEETING WITH MEMBERS OF CONGRESS AND THE ADMINISTRATION

Face-to-face meetings are the most effective way to influence policymakers. You can meet with them either in their district offices or in Washington, DC. If you are unable to see policymakers in person, you should still meet with their staffers.

ARRANGING THE APPOINTMENT

- † To meet with your senators and/or representatives, call the legislator's office (either in Washington, DC or at home). Identify yourself as a constituent (if you are) and ask to speak to the staffer who is responsible for immigration. Generally, members of Congress are in Washington, DC Tuesday through Thursday, and are frequently home Friday through Monday and when Congress is not in session.
- † If you are asking for a meeting with White House staff or staff for other administrative agencies, it may be more difficult to identify with whom you need to speak. At the White House, immigration policy is often handled by Domestic Policy staff, although the President's political advisors have great influence.
- † When you speak to the staffer, explain the purpose of the meeting and who will be attending.



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PREPARING FOR THE MEETING

- † **DO YOUR HOMEWORK!** Know exactly what you want to say and carefully review your messages.
- † If possible, compile information about the impact of specific immigration issues on the members of Congress' district/state. Do not compile a long list of statistics: your elected officials will not remember them and they will lose their impact. Prepare a few dramatic numbers or anecdotes to illustrate your points. Collect recent local news articles that illustrate the issue. Or, consider including in your meeting individuals who would be affected by the policy change.
- † To encourage policymakers to support a specific immigration issue, present materials that clearly articulate your position, using specific case examples when possible.
- † Know the counter-arguments and be ready to respectfully answer any questions or disagreements.
- † Make sure everyone in your group is prepared. Brief everyone attending the meeting and make sure they have any written materials to review well ahead of time.
- † Be organized. Agree ahead of time the role each participant will take, who discusses what, and in what order participants will speak.
- † If you are going as part of a larger coalition, meet ahead of time. It is unwise to have an internal debate or conversation in front of your elected official. Be certain everyone agrees on your group's central message and what you want to ask the legislator to do for you.
- † Prepare a packet to leave behind that could include background information, fact sheets and/or newspaper clippings. Attach your card or contact information to the packet.
- † If arranging a meeting with White House or other Administration staff, you may have to give your name, date, and social security number ahead of time to the person chairing the meeting, for a security check. Please do not give your contact information and social security number if you do not have proper immigration status.

MAKING THE PRESENTATION

- † Be on time! Allow extra time to clear security, especially at the White House, on Capitol Hill, and in busy federal office buildings.
- † Begin by introducing yourselves.
- † Explain to the legislator/staffer why you asked for the meeting.
- † Present your concerns simply and directly. Get to your "bottom line" immediately. Be brief, direct, courteous and positive. Presentation of each topic roughly should follow this outline:

Background: Explain the issue in the simplest possible terms.

Impact: Explain how the issue directly affects your community or the group you represent.

Recommendation: Indicate what you would like the policymaker to do.

- † Do not fight with the policymaker or staff members. Politely answer questions and concerns, but if you disagree, make your point and move on. Remember, you are meeting with the Member or staff person to inform him/her about your positions on issues and encouraging their support.
- † If you do not know the answer to a question, say so, and promise to get back with the answer. Be sure to follow-up with your answer as quickly as possible after the meeting.
- † Make sure you do not do all of the talking! Give the policymaker opportunities to ask questions or state his or her opinion. Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard, and you will learn much more by listening. Also, ask questions.
- † Stay away from jargon and acronyms. Remember that the policymaker deals with dozens, if not hundreds, of issues each week, each with its own "language."
- † Thank the policymaker if he or she has been supportive. They receive thanks far less than they get criticized. They will appreciate your recognition.
- † Be sure to ask for the policymaker's support. If he or she is already very supportive, ask him or her to cosponsor the relevant bill and/or take a leadership role in moving the bill through the process, getting additional cosponsors, or other ways.

FOLLOWING-UP AFTER THE MEETING

- † Send a note thanking the Member or staff person for meeting with you. Briefly summarize the main points of the meeting.
- † Remember to follow-up with responses to any questions the Member or staff person asked but you could not answer at the time.
- † Do not think of the meeting as an isolated event. Think of other ways to maintain the relationship you have initiated.

3. WEB-BASED LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY TOOL AVAILABLE

The national *Justice for Immigrants* Campaign provides an easy-to-use communications tool for contacting your elected officials. This can be accessed at www.justiceforimmigrants.org/action.html. This site provides information about current national legislative and public policy objectives and offers sample letters.

Additional materials to assist in your advocacy efforts can also be found at www.justiceforimmigrants.org.