

Module #3: Working with Decision-Makers

Legislative Visit Handouts

Legislative Visit Scenario #1: “Don’t Call Us, We’ll Call You”

The decision-maker (and/or staff) listens carefully and asks few or no questions. When you ask about his/her position, you are told he/she will think about your comments. You are thanked politely for your time. This is a totally noncommittal meeting.

What do you do?

First, you should realize this is probably the single most common type of legislative meeting. Nor is it a bad one. You have established who you are, whom you represent, what the issue is, and what your position is. For some meetings, this is as much as you can expect or hope to accomplish.

But you can do more.

- First, respect the fact that the decision-maker has not made a decision; don’t try to press him/her for a commitment he/she is not ready to make.
- Do ask questions to find out what forces might influence the decision. For example, are there other active constituent groups in the district that could influence – either positively or negatively – the passage of the legislation.
- Build your case – cite the impact on the pediatric population in your community or district. Cite other supporting groups.
- Discern the level of grassroots pressure. For example, you might find out whether mail has been received and, if so, is it for or against your position. Also, try to discover if he/she has been contacted by other groups.
- Always ask whether you can provide additional information. **The single most persuasive document you can provide is a one-page fact sheet outlining how this bill will directly affect your state or district.** Other useful information could include a list of cosponsors, especially in the decision-maker’s party. (Your local AAP chapter may be able to provide you with this information).
- Always leave your name, address, and phone number (if you don’t have a business card, write this on the fact sheet you leave) and the phone number for the local AAP chapter office.
- Talk about another issue – briefly. Don’t waste time. This is a good time to discover his/her interests and other information which could provide the personal touch that adds to the relationship. You might be surprised to learn how much you have in common.

As with any important meeting, **follow-up is crucial.** This is particularly true for the undecided. Write a thank you letter, including any information requested at the meeting. For the undecided, it is also helpful to get others to write and/or phone the decision-maker to urge him/her to support your position.

Legislative Visit Scenario #2: “I’m New” or “I Don’t Know Anything about Children’s Health.”

Although this might happen when you meet with your decision-maker, it is more likely to happen with staff. Many staff – particularly those in the personal offices (with whom you will meet most often) – are young and may know little about children’s health issues. In fact, unless your decision-maker sits on a key health committee, don’t expect the staff to know much about the issue. Decision-makers, as well as their staff cannot be experts on all issues.

Alternately, there are also times when it’s to your advantage to meet with staff. Some staff specialize in children’s health and may have more time to spend on the issue. The congressperson also listens to their staff and looks to them for information. If you can begin to build a relationship with staff, then you can likely get them to gain the congressperson’s attention.

But contrary to what you think, this is not bad news!

This is the best time to begin to develop your position as a valuable resource to decision-makers and their staff – the expert on child health issues. Best of all, you are an expert from back home rather than an “insider.” You are the constituent on whom they can rely for accurate information, even when it is very technical. You become an asset; you can make them look good; you can make his/her job easier.

- Start with the basics. State who you are, what type of pediatrics you practice, where your office or hospital is. Tell them who and what the Academy is.
- Give simple information on the issue or issues. Material pertinent to your state or district is particularly valuable.
- Don’t use medical jargon. Assess level of comprehension. Don’t talk down.
- Let them ask questions. In fact, encourage them do so. And treat all questions seriously.
- In addition to the follow-up outlined previously, do what you can to develop the relationship. Letters, phone calls, and visits are all tools to use.
- Remember, new staff becomes experienced staff. Personal staff can and do move to committee assignments. If you encourage an interest in health, he/she could become a good friend in future years.

Legislative Visit Scenario #3: “I Agree” or “Preaching to the Choir”

After you introduce the issue, you are told that the decision-maker agrees with your position.

Great! Now what?

Instead of ending the conversation right then and there, you can use this opportunity to establish your position and to gather information.

- First, don't waste time, but do ensure that there is a commitment at this time.
- Ask if the decision-maker is a cosponsor (if there is a bill) or would he/she be willing to sponsor, cosponsor, or introduce the bill (if there isn't one already).
- Ask if more information would be helpful, particularly relative to how this issue affects your community, state, district, or how many children would be affected. If more information is needed, try to get a specific idea of what would be helpful without overloading them. (Your AAP chapter may be able to provide you with the additional information you're looking for.)
- Ask if they know other decision-makers who should be approached.
- Ask what they are hearing in support and opposition to the issue.
- Ask about other organizations that support/oppose the decision-maker's position.
- Ask if you or the Academy can help solidify support or identify the opposition.

Follow-up to this meeting may not be as difficult as with scenario two, but you will need to keep lines of communication open, so that you can be useful as the expert resource.

Legislative Visit #3A: “I Agree, But....”

This is a variation of the #3, but with a twist. You may hear many excuse at the end of “I agree, but.....”, including, “there is no money, so how can we...?”

Don't let this throw you!

You may not have all the answers; the Academy may not have all the answers. But, find out what the objections are and how the decision-maker can be satisfied. If you cannot supply the answers at the meeting, ensure them you will find out more information and get back to them soon.

Legislative Visit Scenario #4: “That is Not My Position” or “I Disagree” (Politely)

After opening the discussion and presenting your issue, the decision-maker or staff tells you politely he/she disagrees with your position.

The conversation does not necessarily end here.

First, this happens rarely. Decision-makers do not like to directly disagree with constituents. Try the following tactics:

- Find out why there is disagreement. Time can be wasted by trying to argue against misconceptions. If you find out that he/she has misconceptions, you can respond to them, presenting facts about the needs of the children in your community, state, or district, and how the legislation will affect them.
- Attempt to discern whether the problem is the issue of politics, for example, competing interests from a key constituency or pressure from the decision maker’s colleagues or party leaders. Lack of understanding about the issue can be handled with facts. Politics are a different story. A clue that this is the case is that it does not appear that there is an understandable reason (from your perspective) why the decision-maker takes a particular stand.
- Listen carefully. Don’t dismiss criticisms and opposition automatically. There may be a solid basis for his/her opposition. You may need to gather more information and facts to present at a different time. You could win points just because you listened seriously to his/her comments. Time also gives you the opportunity to judge the depth of the opposition.
- Don’t try to negotiate during the initial meetings. Time should be taken to carefully consider his/her position and yours and whether his/her concerns can be addressed.

After the meeting, analyze how what you learned can be used or diffused. Draw upon expertise of others in your chapter and the Academy staff.

An extra postscript is needed here: Don’t debate issues involving ideology, morals, or religious issue (i.e. bioethics, AIDS). If it appears a position has been taken due to ideological or religious grounds, just file that knowledge away. There are other, better, venues for a debate.

Legislative Visit Scenario #5: “I Disagree with Everything You Say, And...”

The adversarial visit is the one you are really worried about, but it almost never happens – honestly!

Decision-makers and their staff may disagree with you, but they will not attack you or your position. In fact, they do not like to disagree with you at all. Remember, you are a constituent.

But, just to round out this exercise, say you do walk into a visit and discover you are in hostile territory. The other person essentially takes charge of the meeting and disputes everything you have tried to say.

What do you do?

- Keep calm. If you are meeting with staff, try to determine whether this is a personal opinion or the position of the decision-maker. If it is the opinion of the staff, a meeting with the decision-maker might be the next step.
- End the meeting as soon as possible.
- You will need to be in contact with the decision-maker again, but you may need reinforcements. Reinforcements may be information, other members of your chapter, the AAP, or finding the right contact that can talk to him/her.