

Possible scenarios for meetings with Congressperson and/or staff aide

(Modified and used with permission from the AAP Federal Affairs Office)

Scenario 1: “Don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

The Representative (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, realize this is probably the single most common type of legislative meeting. It is not 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 Representative 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.
- Build your case-- cite impact on the pediatric population back home. 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 includes a list of cosponsors, especially in the Representatives’ party.
- Always leave your name, address, and phone number (if you don’t have a business card, write this on the fact sheet you leave)
- Talk about another issue--briefly. Don’t waste time. If you are meeting with staff, this is a good time to discover if he/she is from your state and other information, which could provide the personal touch that adds to the relationship. You would be surprised how many of the staff went to college with your sons or daughters, or had cousins in your town, etc.

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 Representative to urge him/her to support your position.

Scenario 2: “I’m new” or “I don’t know anything about health”

Although this might happen when you meet with the Representative, it is more likely to happen with staff. There is a lot of turnover on Capitol Hill. Many staff—particularly those in the personal offices (with whom you will meet most often) are young and may know little about health issues. In fact, unless your Representative sits on a key health committee, don’t expect the staff to know much about the issue.

Staff cannot be experts on all issues. In the personal offices, the staff may cover five or six issues, and it may not be a combination which makes sense. For example, he/she may cover defense, education, health and transportation. Now for some of you, it is easy to draw comparisons and links among these issues, but the staff may not see it that way.

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 the staff—the expert on child health issues. Best of all, you are an expert from back home rather than a “Washington 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 out with the basics. State who you are, what type of pediatrics (or health related profession) you practice, where your office (hospital) is located.
- 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 to 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 when you are in Washington are all tools to use. But don’t be a pest.
- Remember, new staff become 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 the future.

Scenario 3: “I agree” or “preaching to the choir”

After you introduce the issue, you are told that the Representative 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 Representative is a cosponsor or would he/she be willing to sponsor, cosponsor, or introduce the bill
- Ask if more information would be helpful, particularly relative to how this issue affects your state or 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 being overload.
- Ask about other organizations that support/oppose the Representative's position. Ask if you can help solidify support or identify the opposition. Follow-up to this meeting may not be as difficult as with scenario 2, but you will need to keep lines of communication open, so that you can be useful as the expert resource.

Scenario 3-A: “I agree, but....”

These are variations of the previous type, but with a twist. You may hear many excuses at the end of “I agree, but..... These days, the typical twist is (or “but”) there is no money, so how can we.....?

Don't let this throw you!

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

Scenario 4: “I disagree with everything you say, and....”

The adversarial interview is one you are really worried about. But, it almost never happens--- honestly!

Representatives and 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. 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 (it does happen) or the position of the Representative. If it is the opinion of the staff, a meeting with the superior, perhaps back home, might be the next step.
- End the meeting as soon as possible.
- You will need to be in contact with this office again, but you may need reinforcements. Reinforcements may be information, other members of your chapter, or finding the right contact back home that can talk to him/her.