



MHANYS Mental Health Matters

Advocacy Dos and Don'ts - Meetings with Legislators

Things You Should DO

Know before the meeting who in your group will lead the discussion and the roles of others

Before your meeting (and assuming that there are more than one of you), decide what role each person will play in the meeting. For example, one person could be the spokesperson and will start off the conversation with introductions. Not everyone in your group needs to speak, but it's a good idea that you determine who will speak and what they will say. Perhaps someone tells their story and someone else talks about a certain newspaper article. It's also a good idea to have someone take notes. What's important is that you're organized as a group and not interrupting or talking over one another.

Be Flexible – expect the unexpected

Legislators' schedules can be very erratic. Sudden unplanned meetings occur, emergencies in the district happen or legislators are called by leadership to vote on a bill. Usually your meeting will still take place although it might be with one of the legislator's staff.

Make it Human-be prepared to use concrete examples and personal stories

Because mental illness is relatively common most of us (and most legislators) have a personal story to tell about their own challenges or that of a close family member or friend. Sharing a story about real peoples' mental health being impacted is a powerful way to advocate. Also, be prepared to listen attentively and empathetically if the legislator shares a story with you. It happens more often than you might think.

Be assertive, but always polite

This may seem obvious, but it can take some discipline to be both assertive but also polite, especially when we are passionate about an issue. Part of advocacy is building relationships. Showing proper respect and courtesy will help assure that your relationship with your elected representatives continues to grow over time.

Be Focused

Part of being focused is being prepared and clear about what you want to talk about with your legislator. In most cases you will probably only have 10 or 15 minutes for your meeting so being focused helps assure you accomplish your objective for the meeting within that timeframe. While a little "small talk" can go a long way in building relationship, be careful not to lose focus on the task at hand.

Listen as well as speak

Legislators are people too and many like to talk. Be patient. You'll get your turn.

Know what action you want your legislator to take

Always be prepared with what advocates often call the "Ask". What are you going to ask your legislator to do? What action do you want your legislator to take? Examples include voting a certain way on existing legislation, introducing new legislation, sending a letter to their leadership about an issue, or asking the legislator to visit and tour a school or other organization in the community. Often, a legislator will ask you what they can do for you. Whether they do or don't be ready with a clear ask.



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Things You Should NOT DO

Act disappointed if meeting with staff and not the legislator

It can be an exciting experience to meet a Senator or Assemblymember. More often than not however you will meet with the legislator's staff. It's very important not to show disappointment (even if you are a little) because you thought you'd be meeting with the legislator, but instead your meeting is with one of their staff. This is still an excellent opportunity because the staff is often very knowledgeable about the issues and will surely brief the legislator about your meeting. Be sure to treat the staff person with the same respect you would give the legislator. It will be remembered.

Be argumentative or disrespectful

When you're passionate about an issue it can be tempting to argue or even be disrespectful, especially if the legislator or staff disagrees with you or "plays the devil's advocate". Healthy, polite debate is fine, just be careful not to fall in the trap of your emotion's getting the best of you.

Cut off the legislator/staff

This can be a challenge especially because your meeting time is short and a talkative legislator or staff person can at times dominate the meeting. If you don't get to say everything you had planned, don't worry. A good listener is often remembered fondly and you will hopefully have more chances in the future.

Stray from the purpose of meeting/engage in too much small talk

This is similar to "do stay focused". Talking about issues other than what's on your agenda (like small talk) helps build relationship, and that's good. Just don't allow yourself to talk too much about things other than the issue(s) you came to discuss.

Be afraid to say "I don't know" or "I'll get back to you"

We all want to be perceived as knowledgeable about the topic at hand and no one wants to be embarrassed by not knowing the answer to a question. Resist the urge to respond by guessing when you don't really know the answer. Be honest when you don't know, but promise to get back to the legislator when you do have an answer. Then be sure to follow up on that promise.

Raise issues beyond the legislator's control

This requires at least enough knowledge about the issue(s) you plan to discuss in your meeting to know whether it's within the legislator's control. For example, Medicare legislation is a federal issue. State lawmakers have little if any control over federal programs so asking them to "fix" something in the Medicare program would not be fruitful.

Take anything personally or burn bridges

Most legislators are friendly, likeable people. Let's face it – that's part of the reason they were electable in the first place! But they are also people too and they have good days and bad ones. If you ever feel disrespected or offended by a legislator or their staff by something they say or do, try not to take it personally. Give them the benefit of the doubt and maintain your composure. Remember, you're trying to build relationship and burning bridges will not advance your cause. That said however, never allow anyone to be abusive or inappropriate toward you and report any instance of abuse to the proper authority. Such behavior, although rare toward a constituent, should never be tolerated.