

## Meeting With Your Legislator!

Personal meetings with policy makers are among the most powerful opportunities to make the case for substance abuse prevention and treatment. Lawmakers need to hear from constituents and experts that prevention and treatment are more effective and economical than law enforcement and incarceration as strategies to address a wide range of community health and safety problems. You can help by reinforcing this message on the local level, including it in meetings with your Representative or Senator.

Meeting with a legislator presents particular advocacy challenges. Generally, members of Congress are charismatic and charming people, eager to hear the views of their constituents. However, their goals in a meeting may differ from yours. You will want him/her to act, or make a commitment to support your aims. On the other hand, the member may be inclined to avoid controversy and balk at making a clear commitment to you. Expect ambiguity, but don't give up.

### **BEFORE THE MEETING**

#### **KNOW YOUR LEGISLATOR -**

Be prepared to appeal to his/her personal, professional, and legislative concerns. For starters, learn something about the district and the member's election record. How did he/she vote on other prevention and treatment issues? On similar issues? What personal information may be useful? Both the Almanac of American Politics (National Journal) and Politics in American (Congressional Quarterly), available at major libraries, provide useful background on members of Congress. Talk to friends who may know the lawmaker and his/her interests. Use this information to develop a realistic sense of what you can expect to accomplish during the meeting.

#### **PLAN AHEAD -**

Find out about the member's home schedule, and make an appointment for your coalition to meet with your representative when he/she is home. Be sure to tell the scheduler the purpose of the meeting. Send (or fax) the office brief, summary information and a list of people who will attend the meeting. In addition, find out if the Congressperson conducts "town hall" meetings. At those gatherings, you can raise your concerns in public, perhaps with the media present.

#### **SPEAK WITH A UNIFIED VOICE-**

Recruit leaders from local coalitions, VIP's, and articulate program participants and alumni who know the value of the programs to attend the meeting. Plan and decide your strategy with participants well in advance of the meeting. Designate a facilitator and a note taker who will record everything the member says during the meeting.

## **DURING THE MEETING**

### **HAVE CLEAR, LIMITED GOALS-**

Keep the discussion to one message and one or two main points. Be specific about what you want the lawmaker to do. Repeat your message in as many different ways as possible.

### **PROVIDE SUCCINCTLY WRITTEN MATERIALS AND HELPFUL VISUAL AIDS-**

Focus on how prevention and treatment programs meet critical community needs. Point to success stories and to programs that have generated productive citizens and saved taxpayer expenditures. Demonstrate: prevention and treatment programs save money; that treatment and prevention programs work; and that much of the community relies on the prevention and treatment services that your program provides. Invite the Congressperson to make a personal visit.

### **MAKE THE MOST OF ANY OPPORTUNITY FOR SMALL TALK-**

Use introductions strategically to create a personal rapport and relationship. Use your knowledge of the member's background to develop common ground.

## **AFTER THE MEETING**

What you do after the meeting may be at least as important as what you said during the meeting. Follow-up and persistence will be necessary to wage a successful campaign.

### **EVALUATE THE MEETING-**

Immediately following, discuss what happened at the meeting. Were your goals accomplished? Why/ Why not? What commitments did the member make, if any? What follow-up is required? Did you promise to provide additional information? What points were best communicated during the meeting? Which were weakest? A written summary prepared by the note taker and distributed to meeting participants will be a helpful tool for follow-up and ongoing advocacy efforts.

### **SEND A THANK YOU LETTER-**

Be gracious and polite, no matter how badly the meeting went. Include in your letter any information you promised to provide the member. Restate your concerns and what you want. Suggest how the member can help you, even if he/she does not entirely support your position. Remind him/her about the consequences of his/her position; who will be helped or hurt by his/her vote.

**LET CAADPE KNOW WHAT HAPPENED-**

Please send a written summary of your meeting immediately to the people or groups who represent you in Washington, DC. Be sure to point out the member's bottom-line position, if any. Was a commitment made: Does he/she want/need additional information? Did you have any particular problems communicating your message? What concerns did the member raise during the meeting?