



# Visiting Your Members of Congress

## Be a Voice for Hungry and Poor People

*Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy. –Proverbs 31:8-9*

## Before the Visit

- If you are going as a group, choose one person to serve as the leader. This person will make introductory remarks during the visit and ask others in the group to introduce themselves.
- Decide on the main points you want to make. Unless your group is very large, make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak.
- Determine if there are actions for which you can thank your member of Congress.
- Role-play the visit so that everyone can feel comfortable talking about the issues, especially if it is the first congressional visit for anyone in the group.

## Arriving at Your Member's Office

- Be on time and patient. It is not uncommon for members of Congress (or their staff) to be late because of unexpected floor action in Congress. Aides play an important role in advising their members of Congress and making policy recommendations, so don't be discouraged if your member of Congress is unavailable.
- Tell the receptionist who you are and with whom you're meeting. If you would like to meet with your member of Congress and you don't have an appointment, tell the receptionist you are a constituent and would like to meet with the aide who handles federal spending on domestic and international anti-hunger programs.

## Conducting a Successful Meeting

- The group leader should ask people to introduce themselves.
- In case your member of Congress or his/her aide is called away early, make your point succinctly at the start. Remember, you may have only a few minutes with the member of Congress. Be clear. Be brief. Be gone!
- Thank the member of Congress for a positive action he or she has taken that relates to reducing hunger or poverty. If there is no clear vote or action for which you can say, "Thank you," state why you think it's important that programs that help people struggling with hunger and poverty are properly funded.
- If possible, share personal stories about your personal conviction concerning the topic of your visit.
- Aim for a balanced conversation. Ask questions that will encourage discussion of the issue. This should be a conversation and dialogue on both sides. Be sure your legislator hears your point of view.
  - Remember that you're not expected to be an expert. If you don't know the answer to a question, offer to get back to your member of Congress. Contact Bread for the World with the unanswered question/concern, and Bread staff can help you follow up.

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- Close the deal! Ask the member of Congress for a specific commitment.
  - The group leader should close by reiterating the main points, stating any commitments you made. Thank the member of Congress or aide.

## Follow Up

- Select at least one person to write a follow-up card thanking the member of Congress and/or aide for the meeting. Remember to include any additional information and materials that were requested. Ask a Bread for the World staff member to help you compile any information you don't have.
- Keep up a relationship with your members of Congress once you're back home. Stay in touch with the member of Congress' aides, occasionally reminding them about the issues you care about and how they impact their home district or state.
- Keep pressure on your members of Congress by using the media. Write a letter to the editor to your local newspaper, explicitly mentioning your lobby visit in Washington, D.C., and calling on your members of Congress to protect programs that help people struggling with hunger and poverty in the United States and around the world.

## Helpful Lobbying Dos and Don'ts

### Do

- Be courteous, affirming, and appreciative
- Be assertive, not aggressive
- Be clear and concise—and focus on the decision you want your member of Congress to make
- Be a good listener
- State your point of view and back it up with sound reasons
- Ask questions
- Politely bring the conversation back to the topic you want to speak about if a member of Congress, aide, or meeting participant gets off track
- Close the deal

### Don't

- Be argumentative or combative
- Dominate the conversation. Make sure you hear the member of Congress, or his/her staff's thoughts, too
- Bring up other issues that are off the topic. They are likely covered by a different aide, and you do not want to dilute your message by trying to discuss too many issues
- Become disillusioned if your member is not responsive to your concerns. Remember, we are people of hope!