

Congressional Advocacy: Planning Your Virtual Visit

Our Tradition Calls Us into Public Life

“This entails working for a social and political order whose soul is social charity. Once more, I appeal for a renewed appreciation of politics as “a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good”.

-Fratelli Tutti, 180

As Pope Francis teaches in *Fratelli Tutti*, as Catholics, we are called to be deeply engaged in the work of our communities. This includes advocating alongside and on behalf of those who are most vulnerable in our society.

An essential part of being an effective advocate is building relationships. By participating in legislative advocacy, we can build and strengthen relationships with our members of Congress and their staff.

We share our views from our Catholic perspective, which deepens our commitment to our issues. Members of Congress are also often people of faith, as well, and this can create a moment of connection. It's important to share your passion for your issue in the light of our faith tradition.

We elect members of Congress. Responding to constituents is a high priority for members and their staff. While the many organizations of the U.S Church meet regularly with members of Congress and the Administration to communicate its priorities, **you play a critical and fundamental role as constituents** to enhance this work by connecting directly with your elected officials to advance the common good. Your local perspective and stories are impactful and powerful because they reflect reality on the ground and in the member's state or district, not just generic talking points.

Direct interactions from constituents, like virtual visits, are the most effective way to influence a member of Congress, even more so than individualized letters or emails. During the pandemic, Congressional offices have received increased communication from voters, so staff plan to devote more time and resources to engaging remotely with constituents through video conferencing or online town hall meetings.

These connections can and should **open up a dialogue**--the member of Congress and their staff get to hear the Church's views on how public policy impacts poor and vulnerable people. At the same time, they can use you as a sounding board for ideas and ask for information about the state or district and the programs you work on. Invite them to see your programs in action.

You can establish yourself and your organization as resources for Congressional offices through these visits. Keep in mind, advocacy is better together! Most advocacy visits are done with a mix of people who are new and those who have a lot of advocacy experience.

Preparing for Your Virtual Visit

Get to Know Your Congressional Members

1. Through Their Websites:

Visit USCCB's [Legislative Action Center](#) to determine your senators and representatives. Go to their websites, paying specific attention to:

- Biographies
- Committee Assignments
- Stances on Issues
- Recent Press Releases: tend to highlight the issues most important to them

A few tips:

- Look for opportunities to make a personal connection:
- Alma Mater, Community and Professional Groups, Parish/Other House of Worship, Hometown.
- Don't just focus on what they say--pay attention to what's NOT there.
- Is the member of Congress largely silent on the issues we'll be advocating?
- Don't make assumptions about their faith, politics, history, or experiences.
- Follow them! Check out their Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels.

2. Through Media:

Search local media outlets and online for articles and news broadcasts that mention their local initiatives or votes they have taken on issues.

- What projects have they supported?
- Which local issues are most important to them?
- What programs or activities does my organization have that relate to my member's interest?

A few tips:

- Ask yourself: Is there a way I/my organization can support the local work of the senator or representative? Try to determine common ground and mutual interest.
- Meeting a member of Congress can seem daunting. It's okay to be excited, but don't let it scare you. The more prepared you feel, the better the meeting will go.

3. Through Legislation They've Supported:

- Research the legislation they have introduced and cosponsored at the Library of Congress' [legislative database](#).

Read the statements they have made in the [Congressional Record](#).

Get to Know Your State and District

Questions to ask:

1. What does your state and Congressional district look like, when viewed through the lens of the issues we care about?
2. Compile information about how these issues impact your local district as well as your diocese and church programs.
3. Put this information into a format that you can send easily to your legislator. Many [State Catholic Conference](#) and Diocesan websites have good information about the Catholic community in your state and district.

Get to Know the Issues

- Be sure to review the key issues and resources available through USCCB/MRS.
- Develop a “game plan” with your group. Decide on a succinct agenda and a clear message that your group can agree on for your visit. Decide who will speak about what, and in what order, in advance so that you can advocate as a united front for your issues.
- Do your best to learn about the issues, but do not become overwhelmed by this task. Remember, you don’t have to be an expert to raise issues with your member, just a constituent with concerns.
- Practice your remarks. Hone talking to be able to present within 10-15 minutes. Rehearsing is critical for a smooth-running virtual meeting.

During Your Virtual Visit

Virtual Congressional Meeting Tips

1. **Virtual doesn’t mean casual.** Normally, we meet with our members of Congress in their offices, but in a virtual meeting we are inviting them, or their staff, into our homes! Remember to choose a place that checks the following boxes:
 - Consistent, strong, and dedicated internet connection – preferably not a public connection
 - Quiet with limited ambient noise and a simple background
 - Private – try to find a space where no one will be walking behind you

Dress Appropriately for the Call. Take the time to dress the part, just like you would if you were visiting an office on Capitol Hill. Feel free to show personality or state pride, but make sure that your clothes demonstrate your dedication and respect for the issues you are discussing.

Turn off your phone. Meetings are usually only half an hour long – at most! You need to be fully invested during the whole meeting. Turn your phone off or leave it in another room.

Close all unneeded windows and tabs on your computer. This will help your internet connection and will keep you looking focused on camera. If you look distracted because you are looking at another screen or window – the person you are talking to will notice.

Don’t use the chat function. The chat function should only be used if there is a technical issue. While GIFs and memes can be fun in casual conversations, they can distract from the issue at hand and reduce the impact of your statement.

Preparation is even more important in a virtual space. Though you should always come prepared to a legislative meeting, this is even more important when you aren’t physically in the same room with your colleagues. Make sure everyone knows each person’s role and the order in which everyone is speaking. Write down the order of speaking and indicate back-up speakers in case someone experiences a technical issue when it’s his or her turn to speak. It’s even helpful to write down the order in which people will introduce themselves.

They are learning, too. The members of Congress and their staff have had to completely change the way they meet with constituents and it doesn’t always go smoothly. Don’t dwell on potential issues or mistakes but give space for those human moments to connect on a shared experience. While we hope congressional staff will use their camera during the meeting, some may choose not to, and some offices may have a policy not to use zoom (and will instead call in to the meeting). Don’t worry – they are still listening to you. It is still helpful to have your camera on so your delegation can see you and feel connected.

Conducting the Meeting

Here are a few ideas to help your meeting go smoothly

- Remember to introduce yourself and your group and thank them for the chance to meet.
- Mention the Catholic presence in your state, describe your role in the community and how you can help the member understand the local impact of legislation.
- Give an overview of the issues you will discuss and background information you may have.
- Be positive and friendly, but confident and calm. Remember--they are there to serve you.
- Know your agenda and stay on message. Keep your message simple and to the point.
- Explain how these issues affect you. Provide human interest stories to illustrate.
- Get a quote from your elected official to add to your press release.
- Try to get a response regarding the member's position on the issues. If they are supportive, ask the member to take some concrete action: cosponsor specific legislation, send a letter to the appropriate committee, sign or start a "Dear Colleague" letter indicating support.
- If a member or staff disagree with you, do not argue. Respond positively, respecting his/her position and offer to supply information as to why you hold your position.
- Take notes during the visit. Ask for the names and emails of staff assigned to work on your issues.
- If you are asked a question and do not know how to respond, say that someone will follow-up.
- Don't assume the member is familiar with the details of the issue/bill, or Catholic teaching.
- If the member requested any additional information during the meeting, include it in your note and indicate that you will follow up.
- Contact your elected official's district office to follow up on issues. You can invite your elected official on a site visit to experience your organization.

