

Workshop: Activism 101 - Lobbying and Birddogging

BEFORE THE LOBBY VISIT:

Before the meeting, ask yourself “What is my intention?”

- Is it to begin a **dialog** with a member/their legislative assistant, who is not currently a co-sponsor (and possibly unsupportive)? Or is it to **lecture** this person that Single Payer is the solution and they are just uninformed and a conservative ideologue if they don't get on board?! I don't recommend this approach. Here's a link to resources for making the conservative case for Single Payer: <http://www.pnhp.org/gop>
- If the member/aide is not a co-sponsor but is likely supportive or leaning supportive, is the intention to find out how much they know about the bill and answer questions or clarify misperceptions? Or is it to threaten the member/aide that they'd better co-sponsor or risk losing your vote in the next election? NOTE: this may be a reasonable message, stated more tactfully, at the close of the meeting.

Gather your participants. It is VERY IMPORTANT to have a CONSTITUENT, if at all possible. WEAR YOUR WHITE COAT. Don't wear “buttons”, especially if meeting with a potentially unsupportive member.

- Assign roles: Leader, story teller (evidence-based research from Pediatric literature on Immunization supports the value and impact of anecdotal stories to influence decision-making.) The story-teller may be a doctor or medical student or other health professional with a patient story or it may be a person impacted by uninsurance, underinsurance, disability. Then a medical speaker (doctor, nurse, pharmacist), a BUSINESS LEADER, and/or a FAITH LEADER. Other possibilities? LABOR?
- Do some homework on the legislator you are visiting: what committees are he/she on, what recent legislation have they sponsored/co-sponsored or voted for or against that you can give a specific “thank you” for your position on this bill. **Legislators like to be appreciated!**
- Have some HANDOUTS but preferably one-page, bullet point rather than lengthy articles; you can refer to articles and ask the member if they would like you to send them a link, following the meeting, to specific articles that address questions brought up in the meeting.
- Of course, dress professionally.

DURING THE LOBBY VISIT:

Leader - makes introductions and is responsible for tracking the “energy” in the room; is the member hostile? Leader may need to slow things down and spend more time than planned just LISTENING! “Until people are done talking, they aren’t listening.” “What people need is a good listening to.” EX: hostile aide we visited who was quoted in the press by a single payer lobby visitor and NOT inclined to say anything to us unless we agreed not to quote him!

Leader also keeps other speakers from “going rogue”, talking too long, not making their points clearly.

Story-teller - story has to be true; don’t embellish. Tell just enough to MAKE A POINT - then tell the member how this situation makes you feel and what universal needs/values this brings up for you.

Ex: My patient, whose brother is proud that he can support his family as an independent roofer - but can’t afford health insurance for himself. Falls off roof and thinks “please God let me die so my family won’t go bankrupt from medical bills.” POINT: I don’t want to work in a health care system that adds financial worry and stress on top of injury or illness. Feelings: sad, frustrated, Values: Use a frame that resonates with your listener! Caring/fairness resonates with liberal/democratic-leaning member but may feel like fingernails on a chalkboard to a conservative. Perhaps speaking to values of sanctity of the body (no one should hope to die before their time), authority (I count on my elected officials to have my best interests in mind when they legislate) and/or fiscal responsibility (I want my healthcare tax dollars to go to healthcare, not insurance company profit and bloated administration).

Other speakers: Less is more.

Leader (at the end): Make a clear request. Co-Sponsor? Meet again? Read the bill? Have a town hall meeting and hear from more of constituents?

This may be the time to politely let the member/aide know that you are organizing in their district/state and that you are not going away and that you will gladly keep them apprised of your activities and progress.

AFTER THE LOBBY VISIT:

Doing a “debrief” after the visit can be very helpful. What worked? What didn’t work?

Send a “Thank You” email or snail mail. If you agreed to send supporting information/articles, don’t forget to do that.

See this lobby visit as part of a larger, escalating direct action campaign. One-off protests, lobby visits, rallies, etc. are not effective. **Plan your next action now.**

Suggestions: write a letter to the editor in member’s local paper; hold a “teach in” in member’s district; attend a town hall or hold an “empty chair” town hall if member won’t hold one; others.