

Libraries of Washington State

Grassroots Advocacy: Meeting with your elected official

Meeting with your elected officials is a lot easier than most people think. Remember – they work for you! A personal meeting is one of the **best** opportunities to share information, demonstrate constituency concerns and gain attention for key issues facing your library system.

Where can you meet? It's not always necessary to travel to your city hall or to Olympia to meet your elected. Most hold town hall meetings, coffees or office hours in their hometowns or around their districts. There is usually a staff person at the office with whom you can meet as well.

Requesting a Meeting

1. Make your request in writing and follow up with a call to the Scheduler or staff person.
2. Suggest specific times and dates for your meeting.
3. Let them know what issue and legislation (by bill number, if you have one) you want to discuss.
4. Make sure they know that you are a constituent.

Preparing for your Meeting

1. **Check in with your library system director or appropriate staff person first.** Your library system may have the materials on key issues, talking points and other background that will be helpful to you in preparing and that can be left with your elected. It is vital that your information is accurate and consistent to avoid any confusion or erosion of credibility (your own, or the library's as a whole!)
2. **Decide what you want to achieve.** What is it you want your elected to do? Make a commitment to introduce or co-sponsor new legislation? Asking the legislator or the staff member to do something specific will help you be more successful and better able to gauge how effective your visit was.
3. **Decide who will attend the meeting.** Keep it small. More than four people can be hard, but having people who reflect the issue and the impact of the policy you are advocating about is helpful.
4. **Agree on talking points.** It's tough to make a case for your position if you are disagreeing in the meeting. Make sure the group is prepped and clear about roles.
5. **Plan out your meeting.** Even the most confident people get nervous. Time is short, be sure to map out who will speak about what, in what order and who will facilitate the conversation.

During the Meeting

1. **Be prompt and patient.** Elected officials run on tight schedules. Show up early and be patient. It's not uncommon for electeds to be late, or to have your meeting interrupted by other business.
2. **Keep it short and focused.** You'll have 20 minutes or less with a staff person and as few as 10 minutes with an elected. Make the most of it: stick to your key messages.
3. **Bring up any personal, professional or political connections to the official that you have.** Introduce yourselves, thank them for any support they've offered on your issue in the past and thank them for meeting with you.
4. **Stick to your talking points!** Stay on track. Back up your point with no more than 5 pages of background for their review later. Make sure the materials are consistent with your message.
5. **Provide personal and local examples of the impact of the legislation.** This is the MOST important thing you can do. Make it real to them and their district.
6. **If you don't know, say so.** You don't have to be an expert on everything. If you don't know, tell them you'll find out and then do it. This gives you the chance to put your strongest arguments in their hands. Ask when you should check back with them to find out what they intend to do about your request. If you are getting them more information, set a clear timeline for when. Don't leave anything hanging.
7. **Set deadlines for a response.** Often the elected hasn't taken a position on legislation yet or won't commit to one in the middle of the meeting. If they tell you they want to think about it, ask when you should check back to find out and again emphasize how important the request is to the people the legislator represents. Set a clear timeline when you will follow up.

After the Meeting

1. Immediately after you meet, **compare notes** with anyone else who was in the meeting to understand what you all heard, know who is following up on key points and when
2. Each person should send a **personal thank you** immediately.
3. **Follow up** in a timely fashion with any requested materials and information.
4. If the elected official or staff member doesn't meet the deadline for action you agreed to during the meeting, ask him or her to set another deadline. **Be persistent AND flexible**
5. **Keep your library system staff informed** about who you are meeting with, when and the outcomes of your meeting. Knowing what you learned, what issues resonated and what didn't is very helpful to your library systems overall communication efforts.