



Visiting Your Lawmakers: A How-To Guide

The most impactful way to build relationships with your lawmakers is through face-to-face meetings. Your first meeting will likely be with a staffer since legislators' schedules are usually very busy. Meeting with a staff member is still a productive way to make your voice heard. Sometimes it is even more productive to meet with a staffer since they have more time to go into detail about issues and often serve as the messenger between the community and the lawmaker. When you meet with a legislator or a staff member, you are representing a larger constituency than yourself. While this may seem overwhelming at first, remember that these visits are essentially a conversation. Below is an outline for scheduling, preparing for, and executing a successful visit.

1) Preparation

- a) Know the facts and arguments for both sides. If you're speaking in support of a bill, a good staffer or Member will ask "what's the opposition to this?" If you're speaking against a specific bill/initiative, it's good to mention "Here is what the other side is saying, but here is what they're NOT saying."
- b) Know the history. Has this issue been addressed before? Why was it defeated or successful?
- c) Know the legislator. Has he/she voted or dealt with this issue previously? Or a similar issue? Think of things that are important to the legislator and how your issue might tie into that. What bills/initiatives has the legislator worked on/introduced? The way to determine this information will vary from state to state, but most states have a searchable database of legislation. Looking at press releases from legislators is also a good way to find out what issues have been important to them in the past. Searching your local newspaper's website is a good start.
- d) Prepare your materials. When you go to your legislator's office you don't want to show up empty handed. Contact our lobbying experts in Washington, D.C. to get materials on the most current secular issues. We will send you documents that you can print yourself and place in a "leave-behind" folder so that your legislator/staffer can follow up with specific questions.

2) Requesting a meeting

- a) Most offices likely prefer an email, and they often have a separate email address for scheduling (usually something like: Smith.Scheduling@mail.house.gov) They may also only accept scheduling requests online through their website. Call the office and politely ask for their preferred method of receiving scheduling requests. Be prepared for the chance that they may schedule the meeting while you're on the phone, so have several dates/times ready to offer if possible.
- b) In your email/phone call, state your name and the organization you're with. Let them know you are a constituent and would like to meet with the legislator about the specific bill/issue as well as the work your chapter does in general.
- c) The more flexible with dates/times you are, the greater the chance you'll be able to get a meeting with the legislator. Typically, a 2 or 3-day window is ideal when requesting a meeting, but if it has to be one specific day, be as flexible with your meeting times as you can.

3) Day of the meeting

- a) Dress nicely. Appearance counts for a lot in meetings. Suits are ideal for men, shirt and tie otherwise. Women should wear business dress attire. First impressions are very important in these situations. Any handouts you have should be clean and not bent or torn.
- b) Appearance is more than just clothing. If you are bringing handouts, make sure they are neat and collected in a folder.
- c) Arrive no more than 10 minutes early (but not LATE).
- d) Know whom you are meeting with. If you are certain it's the legislator let the administrative assistant know that. Say your name, the group you are with, and the time of your appointment. If you are only able to meet with a

staffer, don't be disappointed. Staffers have the ear of a legislator and rely on them a great deal. Treating a staffer with respect can only help your cause.

- e) Be friendly to everyone you encounter. If it is your first time in a particular office, you never know what role a particular staffer has in the office.
- f) If the legislator comes out to greet you, make sure you stand up, shake hands, and introduce yourself.
- g) Use their title when addressing them (Assemblyman/woman, Congressman/woman, Senator) throughout the meeting. Only if they say "Call me XXXX" should you use the informal address.

4) The Meeting

- a) Open by thanking your legislator or staffer for meeting with you. If you have prepared materials, go ahead and distribute a copy to the legislator and staffer.
- b) Describe the Secular Coalition and its mission. The mission is two-fold so be certain to draw attention to both the legislative aspect and the visibility/respect aspect. Your own story will specifically help to highlight the latter.
- c) Never assume that anyone you are meeting with knows even basic information about you and your group. Terms like "humanist", "atheist", and "secular" are not particularly common.
- d) Move from the general to the specific (from an introduction of the chapter to "the reason why we wanted to meet with you today...")
- e) Lay out your case concisely. If you have more than one speaker, figure out ahead of time who will be the primary speaker and who may offer supporting statements. If the purpose of the meeting is to speak about personal experiences on a topic, know the order of who is speaking so it will go quickly and smoothly.
- f) Personal experiences are the best way to get your point across. Even so, don't force it if there isn't a story to be told. General concerns have a place as well.
- g) You may have 5 minutes with a legislator or you may have up to 20 minutes. Be prepared for anything in between that.
- h) Ask if there are any questions. If you don't know the answer, admit that and assure the legislator/staffer that you will get that information to them promptly. **Make sure you send them this information no more than two days after your meeting so it stays fresh in their mind.**
- i) Thank the legislator again for taking the time to meet with you and your group. Let them know you can be a resource on this and other issues from a secular/nontheistic perspective.

5) Follow-up

- a) No more than two days later, send a follow up "thank you" email to the staffer who was in the meeting and to close the loop on any unanswered questions.
- b) If there is movement on the issue on which you lobbied, update the staffer and remind him/her that you met earlier and you wanted them to know the latest on the issue. If it's getting close to a vote, you can politely ask if the staffer knows how the legislator might be voting and if you can provide any information to help with the decision. It is likely you will not receive a response, but it doesn't hurt to politely ask. If you have a good rapport with the staffer, a phone call can be beneficial instead of an email.

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