

How To Prepare For a Meeting with Elected Officials

WHY WE ADVOCATE

Our mission is to save lives by promoting lung health and preventing lung disease. Our volunteer advocates can share a story that will influence the way elected officials think and possibly vote. Policy can affect behavior and change outcomes, that's why we advocate for tobacco tax increases, smokefree laws, adequate tobacco prevention funding for programs and smoking cessation.

We advocate on the federal, state and local levels. You may be involved in all three levels or just one. Remember, our goal is not just to pass legislation, it is also to change attitudes about lung health, smoking, clean air and good public health policy.

We have a BIG opponent, the Tobacco Industry. Tobacco companies have deep pockets. They're known to "buy" influence and votes. Tobacco kills and causes disease. We know there's no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. Everyone has the right to breathe smokefree air.

We fight for healthy air: Six out of 10 Americans live in areas where air pollution reaches unhealthy levels. The American Lung Association leads the fight nationally, regionally and locally for healthy air every day. We fight for stronger clean air standards and enforcement of laws like the Clean Air Act. We fight to lower power plant emissions, to reduce vehicle idling and to promote use of cleaner diesel fuels and vehicles.

Advocacy is simple. It requires preparation, relationships, stories and follow up.

PREPARATION

- Schedule the meeting. Many elected officials have assistants. Find out who that person is by calling City Hall (municipalities), State Capitol switchboard (state legislators) or the Capitol switchboard (Congress).
- Be flexible with meeting availability; usually the meetings are around 15 minutes (or less). Sometimes longer. But getting in front of them is important.
- Let the scheduler know the purpose of your meeting and that you are an American Lung Association volunteer.
- If you are a constituent mention it in your conversation and ask to meet with the elected official. If you cannot meet with the elected official, meet with the Chief of Staff and/or the staff member assigned to the topic.

Materials for the meeting:

- Put together info packet (ask staff for help with these documents: model ordinance, tobacco tax stats, air quality report, background info, public opinion polls, cost benefit information, etc.).
- Plan presentation if two or more people are going (major points, who'll say what, amount of time, etc.).

Day before the meeting:

- Call and confirm the meeting with elected official's staff with whom you made the appointment.
- Call and talk with your American Lung Association staff person for last minute notes, materials and tips.

A SUCCESSFUL MEETING

Tips during meeting:

1. Introduce yourself (name and where you live) and explain that you're an American Lung Association volunteer. Tell why you volunteer with American Lung Association (connection to mission).
2. Be polite, non-confrontational, factual and persuasive. Give council members time to respond to your statements and questions.
3. Keep it brief, two to three minutes. Make your points quickly and move on. Practice your story beforehand and time yourself.
4. Pay attention to elected official's body language and their comments to you. Write them down if you can.
5. Ask a question toward them regarding our issue. For example, "How has secondhand smoke affected you and those around you?"
6. If they are not in favor of our bill, ordinance, issue, ask, "What are your main concerns about this?" Then address those concerns, if you have the information.
7. Don't make up answers – defer to staff person, if they're with you. If you don't know, say you don't, but that you'll get the answer to them.
8. Avoid debating a point that's not valid, or a sidetracking conversation. Our focus is to discuss the topic at hand (reducing exposure of secondhand smoke, increased tax on tobacco products, healthy air to breathe).
9. Do NOT read your notes or testimony. Using note cards that summarize points is better than referring to a written speech. Summarize your points – be prepared to provide a copy of your testimony to elected official. Sometimes they quote their constituent's perspective or story during discussion with colleagues or during a vote debate or prior to vote. Your story will paint a visual picture.

At the end of the meeting:

- Thank elected official for their time and outline what you understand their position to be.
- Let them know you'll be following up soon (with information they asked for or to confirm their position).

FOLLOW UP

- **Elected Official:** Following up to thank them for their time is important. Email is fast and convenient, and when dealing with Congress it is vital because regular mail doesn't work well. For others (state and local elected officials), hand written thank you notes go a long way. If there is additional information that was requested during the meeting, this can be an opportunity to educate them again on the issue.
- **ALA Staff Person:** Please send your notes via email, or call the staff person if they didn't get to attend with you.