

Meeting Your Legislator(s)

Preparing for your visit

1. Most legislators make themselves available during elections, prior to and during legislative sessions, at legislative forums or workshops, community in their districts and by appointment. The following suggestions are ways to maximize the effectiveness of your interaction with a legislator.
2. Prioritize visits to the legislators of your district and to legislators of committees hearing the issue.
3. Make an appointment to see your legislator or executive official. (Legislators seldom have time free for unannounced visitors.)
4. You may wish to go as a team with other nurses or influential constituents in order to maximize visibility. If your lawmaker is unavailable, meet with the legislative assistant. Staff can be very influential in persuading your legislator to listen to your point of view. Lawmakers are confronted with countless pieces of legislation each year - in addition to numerous problems raised by constituents. They often must rely on staff members to develop positions on legislation.

Meeting the legislator(s)

1. Introduce yourself. Carefully choose those characteristics about yourself that will establish you as a credible resource to the legislator; for instance, where you live, where you work and what you do. Be brief and selective.
2. Be prepared. Be factual. Rehearse the main points that you want to make. This may involve preparing sample questions and possible answers for what you anticipate will be the most difficult queries. Role-play your responses with friends or in a mirror. Do as much homework as possible about the personal style of the legislator.
3. Talk to professional lobbyists in the state who have dealt with the legislator in the past. Elicit suggestions on the best way to approach him or her based on personal experience.
4. Create a professional image. Pay attention to your body language. Nervous mannerisms may say more than spoken words. Convey by word and gesture that you are an authority on the issue. Dress professionally.
5. You set the agenda. Decide ahead of time what you are going to talk about. You should be familiar with the legislator's background, perspective on the issues, and legislative interests. Take your profile of the legislator into consideration when preparing for your visit and try to approach the issue from an orientation that will appeal to him or her. If you are asking a series of questions, you may want to submit your agenda to the elected official before the meeting to allow for thoughtful responses. If you are appearing with a group, select a spokesperson to lead the discussion. Be brief and confine your comments as much as possible to the specific issues being discussed. Appointments seldom last longer than 30 minutes.

6. Be able to articulate rationales for why ISNA supports a piece of legislation as well as reasons given by opponents. You must be able to anticipate and intelligently respond to contradictory positions. Constructively criticize opposing positions, NOT their proponents. Share factual information and statistics in support of your position. Avoid nursing jargon.
7. Legislators need not be intimidating. Remember, you can control the nature of the meeting. For instance, field inappropriate questions by responding, "To answer that question, you first have to ask," then pose the question you want to answer. Remain calm throughout the visit. Always move the conversation in the direction of the needs of the public.
8. Share anecdotes or examples which reflect the effects the legislation will have on you as an individual and members of the lawmaker's constituency. Keep in mind we are interested in protecting the rights of consumers and nurses.
9. Humanize the issue by giving concrete examples of how a proposal will affect the lives of your clients and their receipt of health care. Help the legislator feel the issue at a level beyond numbers, budgets, and cost overrides.
10. Do not overstate your case or you will risk losing credibility. Use only factual information and concrete examples to support your position. Do not make statements or promises on behalf of ISNA on issues for which there is no position. Only your personal assurances to explore a legislator's concerns or suggestions are appropriate. Then get back to him or her. It is better to admit you do not know than to promise and not deliver or convey erroneous information. Clearly demarcate what constitutes ISNA's stated position versus your personal opinion as a nurse and constituent.
11. Learn your legislator's position. Listen carefully to your legislator's views with regard to specific issues. Ask questions and try to find areas where the legislator may be sympathetic to your point of view. Avoid prolonged or heated arguments. Controversy will not help our case. Remember, the impression you leave may be more important than the substance of your discussion.
12. Develop an on-going, reciprocal relationship. Try to establish a rapport with your representative prior to needing his or her assistance. Contacting a legislator only when you need a "favor" is bad business and markedly reduces your effectiveness. When interacting, it is better to leave your legislator undecided than committed against you, so take every possible step to prevent a firm commitment against your position. Create a friendly or at least a respectful environment which leaves the way open for another visit. Keep visiting legislators even when they do not agree with your position. Prolonged contact may lessen the intensity of their position over time.
13. You will make a lasting impression if you emphasize the main issues clearly and concisely rather than trying to cover too many topics at once. Be sure to leave a fact sheet, one page position paper, and/or lengthier resource document if it reinforces your position.

14. Offer to be of service to the legislator in the future. End the meeting with a smile and a handshake.

After the meeting

1. Follow-up your contact with a letter thanking the legislator for his or her time and summarizing your perception of the subjects discussed. Thank your representative in advance for any proffered assistance or support voiced at the meeting. Include any written materials you promised to send, and again assure him or her of your willingness to answer questions or provide additional information.
2. Keep a written record of the contact for your files and notify ISNA headquarters so they can follow-up with your legislator.

Compiled using Excerpts from:

"Communication How-tos: How to Handle the Media" by Angela McBride, 1987

Communication materials provided by Melinda Rider 1987

The Washington Nurse 1986 16(2), 5

The Missouri Nurse 1988 Moore, J.R. 55(1), 5-6.