

Chapter 16

How to Work With Congressional Staff

When working with Congressional staffers, please keep the following points in mind:

- (1) **Remember who they are.** Staff members will be key figures in developing policy that can have an impact on you and others in your state and district.
- (2) **Do not overestimate what they know.** Staff members often require outside expertise. Yet, it is important not to be condescending or use jargon. It is smart to ask staff how familiar they are with a particular subject so you can tailor your remarks to their knowledge level.
- (3) **Do not underestimate their influence.** Legislators trust them, depend on them, and act on their suggestions. These 25-year-old staffers have direct access to Members of Congress and will make recommendations and help direct their positions and actions. Junior staffers often are promoted to more senior positions, so it is important to treat all staffers with respect.
- (4) **Be honest.** Provide accurate, complete information to maintain your credibility. Be reliable; do not over-promise or under-deliver. If you do not know an answer, that is fine, but be sure to indicate that you will follow up. Always follow-up if you have promised additional information.
- (5) **Provide summarized, useful information.** Information should be concise, brief, focused, and have references, as appropriate. More information always can be requested/provided.
- (6) **Visit them before asking for a favor.** If possible, introduce yourself and get acquainted before you request something from a staffer or Member.
- (7) **Do not attack ideas.** Oftentimes staffers reach out to stakeholders for input on a draft proposal. This is an honor and should be handled as such. Even if you disagree, be respectful in your constructive criticism and be prepared to offer an alternative idea or proposal. Express your appreciation for their interest in the issue and thank them for asking for your viewpoint.
- (8) **Follow Up.** Be a tenacious advocate. Congressional staff are overworked and could easily forget your issue unless you follow up. Be persistent and polite – it will pay off.
- (9) **Be a Resource and Stay Connected.** Maintaining regular contact is important; be a local resource on whom the staffer can rely. You should make sure that the staffers for your Members receive newsletters, updates, or articles you think may be of interest and assistance to keep them up to speed on key issues in your

community. Be sure not to inundate or overwhelm them, though, as they receive a lot of information and are very busy.

- (10) **Express thanks to the Member of Congress and staff.** Sometimes, we forget to thank Members of Congress and their staff. Express your appreciation whenever appropriate.

Getting to know staff members can be very beneficial; they have access to the power structure and have the capacity to influence the decision-making process. Even if you cannot travel to Washington, DC, you can develop relationships with the local district staff and get to know the DC staff via phone and e-mail. DC staffers often make special trips to the district or state to meet with constituents, so be sure to check occasionally with the Health LAs to see when they might be visiting your area –let them know you would like a few minutes to see them on their next visit.