

Making a Visit to the District Office

While they are in Washington, DC, Members of Congress have staff working in their district offices to meet the needs of constituents back home.

Good to have on your side. District offices have staff dedicated to helping constituents navigate federal programs while also responding to questions and queries from individuals who can't travel all the way to Washington, DC to meet with their Member of Congress. Sometimes district staff are also connected to state and local government agencies and can help with issues at or between these levels. These individuals are good allies to have when you and your program are dealing with challenges or helping students navigate systems.

Good to know. Members often have special district aides that they trust to represent them at district events. District aides can be very strategic allies because they are often well-connected in the community and have the Members' ear.

Good to contact. Writing or calling the district office can have a different effect than meeting with staff in the Member's DC office. Usually the district office reports to the DC office about what particular issues or legislative priorities they are hearing about from constituents. If a district office receives 10 phone calls and meetings about an issue, this may stand out more than 20 phone calls and meetings about the same issue if they went to the DC office.

How to schedule the visit

To schedule a meeting, call the district office and ask to speak with the scheduler. Let the scheduler know you are a constituent and what issues you would like to meet about. The scheduler will know which staff member you need to meet with based on your issue. Call at least a week in advance. Be patient yet persistent in getting the meeting scheduled – you may have to follow-up with the office more than once.

How to prepare

Bring a written statement and materials: Prepare to leave behind written materials that you can leave with the staffer recapping what you will cover during your visit. Be sure to address why this legislation is important to you, how it will affect your program, and what specific action you want the Member to take. Not only will these materials provide the legislator with a written record of your visit, but putting together this information will help you prepare for your appointment. You can even put your request in letter format to make it more formal. Other materials you should bring include statistics and information about your program and the impact of Intensive English programs across the country.

Tips for during the meeting

Explain why you support IEP accreditation and how it impacts your program and the profession: Bring information and statistics from your program, e.g., how many students you serve, the variety of courses offered, overview of typical student, economic

impact of your program, etc. Make it personal and district-specific. Also do not be shy to talk about the challenges you face helping your students get the proper documentation together before coming to the US for short-term English program study.

Be polite and professional: Always be on time and dress professionally. Even if you disagree with your legislator's position, always be polite. A staffer may make critical remarks about your position or organization. He/she may ask you tough questions. If you do not know the answer, remain calm and tell them that you will research the question and get back to them.

How to end the meeting

Ask for a commitment: Your goal is to enlist your legislator's support, so be as specific as possible. Ask the staffer direct questions such as, "Will your boss please cosponsor H.R. 2361 introduced by Representatives Barney Frank (D-MA) and Lamar Smith (R-TX) or S.1338 introduced by Senators Tom Carper (D-DE) and Lamar Alexander (R-TX) to ensure that IEP programs are accreditation before they issue I-20 visa documents?" to elicit direct answers.

Bring a business card: Give the staffer your business card and ask for theirs. The card should contain all your contact information.

Follow up

Follow up your meeting with a thank you card: Regardless of how the meeting goes, you should always follow up by thanking the staffer for his/her time and reiterating the points you discussed in the meeting. This can be sent by email or fax.

Offer to provide more information: Always offer to provide staffers and legislators with additional information on your issue. AAIEP is more than happy to provide you with fact sheets on this issue that you can pass along to your Members of Congress. Offer to provide more detailed information about your program, if necessary.

Have additional questions? Contact AAIEP's and UCIEP's.....