



Making the Most out of Meetings with Legislators

A policy resource for PA rape crisis centers

Overview

Legislation is strongest when it is responsive to the everyday realities of individuals, organizations, and local communities. Research, statistics, and perspectives from state and national levels are important elements in passing good public policies. However, local constituents' voices and experiences can be most influential to legislators. Too often, these are the voices that are missing from the policymaking process.

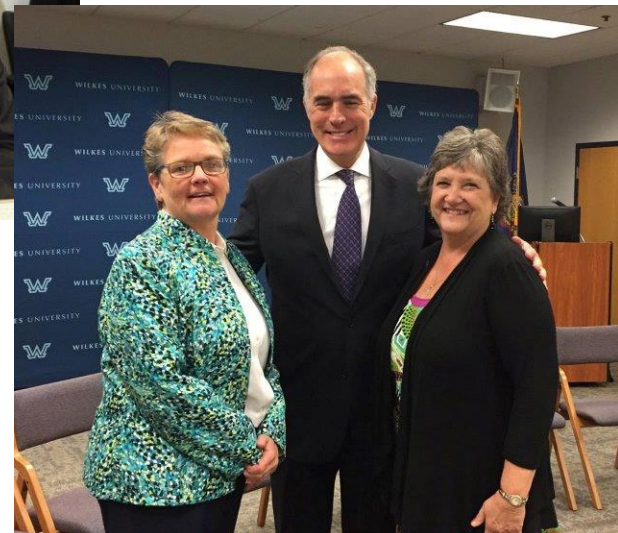
Legislators are elected to represent the interests of their constituents and legislative districts. Therefore, meeting with elected officials is not only a right, but arguably a central part of advocacy in that it gives voice to the needs

of victims and communities in the context of policymaking. Rape crisis center staff members have unique expertise in trauma-informed services and best practices in prevention. Legislative visits offer advocates one platform to share this expertise in service to their mission and to victims

This resource offers advocates steps to take and tips to consider when meeting with legislators.¹ The goal of this publication is to help advocates increase their engagement with legislators and to maximize their resources, time, and impact when they do.



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¹Please see the Lobbying, Advocacy, and Education resource for more information about distinctions between lobbying, education, and advocacy across public and private funds.

Before the meeting

1 Find your legislator and set a time to connect.

Once you identify your legislators, call their offices to schedule a meeting. Most legislators have both a district (local) and a Capitol (Harrisburg) office. Call the office where you plan to meet them.

The scheduler will likely ask you for the purpose of the meeting. You can respond by sharing, “I am a constituent of the Member and would like to talk about sexual assault policy issues.” Or, if you have a more specific purpose, you can share that (“I am a constituent of the Member and would like to talk about bill #...”). However, be strategic in what degree of detail you share so that you are successful in opening a door, not inadvertently closing one. For example, if a legislator is adamantly opposed to a bill you support, you may want to share a broader purpose for the meeting so you can get in the door to share your perspective.

You may not get face-time with the legislator. Meeting with legislative staff (such as executive directors, legislative directors, policy analysts, chiefs of staff, and chief counsel) can be just as productive and impactful. These staffers are often the gatekeepers and are paramount to getting information in front of the legislator. They are critical players in drafting, reviewing, and analyzing bills pertaining to sexual violence or related policy issues.

You will likely get a 15- to 30-minute block of time with the legislator and/or their staff. There are times of year when you may get more time—when they are in the district and/or not in session. But typically, the meetings are brief, making your preparation and follow-up important.



Identify



Schedule



Prepare



Present



Identify your state and federal legislators online

State: <http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/home/findyourlegislator/#address>

Federal: <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members>

2 Determine your goal and “asks”

Before meeting with your legislator, determine the goal of your outreach and the outcome you wish to achieve. There are several goals associated with legislative visits: building relationships, accompanying victims and survivors, providing education, and advocating about a specific bill or legislative priority.

Building relationships

Establishing a connection with your legislators and their staff is a critical component of effective policy advocacy. It is important to establish rapport and to offer your agency as a resource and source of expertise before you ask a legislator to vote a certain way, to support a budget increase for rape crisis centers, or to sponsor a bill.

There are many ways to build rapport with your legislator:

- connecting on a human level (finding similarities on a personal level—whether it is related to family, community interests, school, or other background information);
- inviting them to attend your agency’s events, attending their events;
- publicly thanking/acknowledging them in press or statements; and
- following them on Facebook or Twitter, and many others.

In the context of legislative visits, building rapport may involve thanking them for their past support

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on specific bills or broader efforts, congratulating them on recent awards or accolades, introducing yourself and describing the work of the agency, offering yourself and agency as a resource on sexual violence prevention and response, and sharing materials with them (such as annual reports, agency brochures, and other materials that highlight your work and priorities).



Your goal: to establish rapport with legislator and their staff.

Your potential outcomes:

- legislator agrees to contact you when sexual violence-related policies are considered in their respective committees;
- legislator agrees to attend an upcoming event or to schedule a tour of the agency;
- legislator agrees to attend or sponsor a Sexual Assault Awareness Month event;
- legislator invites you to attend an upcoming hearing, event, or rally; and
- legislator agrees to refer to you/your agency for sexual assault service and prevention needs.

Accompanying victims and survivors

Victims and survivors may wish to use their voices to share their experiences with legislators. This can be empowering, but must always be led by the survivor and in service of their individual goals as well as the larger policy

context. Advocates can provide critical support to victims and survivors in these efforts—before, during, and after a legislative visit. They can help victims and survivors identify their personal goals in meeting with legislators, identify potential rewards and drawbacks, and debrief with them after the meeting and assist with any follow-up that is necessary.



Your goal: to provide support to victims and survivors in meeting with legislators; help legislator understand the human toll of sexual violence and the unique needs and strengths of victims.

Your potential outcomes:

- legislator commits to strengthen services and prevention through policy;
- legislator carries the victim's experience into their policy work; and
- legislator commits to drafting legislation

Providing education

Advocates are well-aware of current strengths and challenges associated with preventing and responding to sexual violence in their communities. They are funded and trained to mobilize best practices in trauma-informed services and effective prevention. This firsthand knowledge is valuable to lawmakers, who are not immersed in or aware of the best available research and models in prevention or front line work with victims.



Your goal: to help legislator increase knowledge about a specific gap or issue.

Your potential outcomes:

- legislator carries more nuanced understanding

of the issue into conversations with colleagues;

- legislator advocates for increased funding for services and prevention;
- legislator agrees to work on a bill to address gap; and
- legislator agrees to hold hearing or rally on the need or gap.

Advocating about a specific bill

It is important that legislators understand how constituents feel about specific legislation. Advocates offer unique insights, perspectives, and expertise surrounding specific bills and priorities. Your advocacy is particularly important when a bill is being drafted, when it has been introduced, when it is assigned to committee, before it is considered in committee, and before it is considered on the Floor.



Your goal: to influence the legislator's action on a particular bill or policy priority.

Your potential outcomes:

- legislator opposes the bill;
- legislator supports the bill;
- legislator agrees to sponsor or co-sponsor a bill;
- legislator agrees to offer an amendment to a bill;
- legislator agrees to talk with colleagues about concerns or to generate support; and
- legislator agrees to hold a hearing/rally about the bill or issue;
- legislator carries your message into committee and floor discussions.

3 Learn more about your legislator

As with any other meeting, training, or advocacy effort, it is critical that we “know our audience.” The same is true when meeting with legislators and their staff. Knowing about their backgrounds, community activities, legislative track records, and where they stand on sexual harassment, abuse, and assault will inform our particular asks and approaches. Use a variety of resources to learn more about your legislators: talk with staff and board members about what they know and look at legislators’ websites, biographies, social media activities, media coverage, and newsletters. Research into the backgrounds of legislators does not need to be exhaustive. These suggestions are offered as a starting place. PCAR can provide assistance to you in gathering this information.

Background

- What is their party affiliation?
- Do they tend to be more liberal, moderate, or conservative in their party affiliation?
- What can you tell from their backgrounds? For example, are they former law enforcement, prosecutors, teachers, business leaders, advocates, public agency officials, etc.? Do they hold degrees in social work, law, education, psychology, criminal justice, health/public health, or other?
- Do they have a history and/or current connection with your center or with an allied organization in your community? What personal or professional connections might your board or staff members have with the legislator? The personal connections are important and can help establish rapport.

Community activities

- What community events do they attend and where have they donated their time/resources?
- How do their efforts in the community potentially intersect with sexual violence services and prevention?
- What awards or acknowledgements have they received? Congratulating them on their

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awards and/or thanking them for their track record in the community is important and meaningful.

Legislative track record

- Are they in positions of leadership—designated by “Majority” in their title—in the House or Senate?
- On what committees do they serve? How might those committees intersect with sexual violence legislation (Judiciary, Health/Human Services, Appropriations, Children and Youth, Education, Aging, etc.)? Are they the majority or minority chairs of committees?
- If newly-elected, what were their policy priorities (their platform) when running for office? How might those priorities intersect



with sexual violence prevention and advocacy? For example, what are their promises and positions on healthcare, substance abuse/ opioids, immigration, living wages, public benefits, reproductive health options, criminal justice, early childhood education, child protection, workplace and community safety, LGBTQ rights, racial justice, and others?

- What bills have they sponsored or co-sponsored? Do they have a track record of getting bills passed? What are their voting records on sexual assault and related legislation?

Where they stand on sexual violence

Sexual violence prevention and victim services garner bipartisan support, with members from both parties invested in PCAR policy priorities. However, given the complexity of sexual violence and the myriad of bills that are introduced each session to address it, it is important to research where legislators fall on specific approaches and efforts.

- What can you tell from their backgrounds and track records?
- Have they been a long-time champion

of sexual violence prevention and response or are they newer to this issue and/or elected office?

- Where do they seem to stand on sexual violence and its intersecting social justice issues?
- Do they tend to be more progressive or more conservative when it comes to social welfare, LGBTQ rights, reproductive health, immigration, restorative justice, criminal justice, and other topics?
- How will this influence your approach and where you place your focus?

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4 Prepare for the meeting

Building relationships

Drawing from what you learned about the legislator, compile notes/talking points that you want to convey during your meeting. Identify three to five points on which you'd like to focus during the meeting, such as:

- thanking or congratulating them for their work;
- personal/professional connections;
- the current staffing and services of your agency; and
- where you see the work headed in the future, upcoming events, etc.

Tailor a packet of materials to leave with your legislator. Include your business card so they can contact you after the meeting. Materials can be promotional and general in scope, but they should also pertain to the specific goal of your meeting (your "ask"). To that end, your packet may include: agency brochure, testimonials or impact statements, annual report, resources, news coverage of your center, upcoming events, business cards, and topic-specific resources that relate to the reason for your visit. Keep the packet light and polished, with essential information only.

Accompanying victims and survivors

Supporting a victim or survivor when they meet with their legislator can be viewed as a form of victim accompaniment and advocacy. Many of

the skills used in other system accompaniments will be relevant in a legislative accompaniment: active listening, advocacy, empowerment, options counseling and planning, power-sharing, debriefing, and ongoing support. It will be helpful to brainstorm together about the possible reactions, statements, and topics of discussion that may arise during the legislative visit and to have a plan for debriefing and addressing the needs the victim/survivor may have afterwards.

Providing education and advocating about a specific bill

If the goal of your meeting is to discuss a current bill or to educate about a particular need, review that bill or priority in advance. When providing education about a need or gap in the community,

it is recommended that you partner with PCAR to first learn more about coalition strategies and the statewide context that can be instrumental in educational efforts with legislators. There may be progress already underway or additional factors to consider.

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Human impact stories from the local community are most compelling in conveying the urgency of an issue or need to legislators.

If you are asking for support or opposition for a particular bill, develop an understanding of the factors influencing that ask. Review any available analyses, talking points, and positions from your organization, PCAR, and others. Has the bill been introduced before? If so, what support and/or opposition did it garner? Why wasn't it passed? If it was passed, what gaps remain? What may be different now—in terms of political support/opposition, the state and national landscape, news and media coverage of the issue, relevant research, etc.?

Talk with staff, board members, constituents, community partners, PCAR, and others about the bill or issue. Find out how they feel and think about the bill or policy issue. If beneficial, invite select individuals to join you in your meeting with the legislator to help boost your message. While it is not always appropriate to bring a large group, it can sometimes be helpful to bring allied partners who can support your message and also add additional expertise and perspectives.

In addition to sharing talking points from PCAR and other organizations, prepare personal notes and thoughts to convey to the legislator during the meeting. While broad talking points as well as compelling statistics can be helpful in illustrating the importance of a bill or policy goal, prepare notes that connect the bill or policy issue to the reality of the agency and its services, the population of victims served, professional experience, and the needs of your larger community.

During the meeting

- Be punctual and arrive early to give yourself time to find the office and meet partners who may be joining the meeting with you.
- When you arrive, check in with the administrative staff person to let them know who you are and with whom you are meeting. Thank them for their assistance.
- Greet the legislator and/or staff member.
- Shake hands and make introductions, including name, title, organization, and community/district. Advocates should introduce themselves, even if they have met the legislator before. Legislators interact with a large constituency base, staff members, advocates/lobbyists, and partners every day. They may not remember each constituent. Don't take it personally.
- Distribute business cards (this can also occur at the end of the meeting).

- Begin the meeting by thanking the legislator or staffer for the meeting. Explain the reason you asked for the meeting.
- Briefly present information pertaining to the goal and intended outcome. Be flexible and open to interruptions and clarifying questions. Share resources to aid in the conversation. Refer to personal notes and other helpful resources pertaining to the topic of discussion. Ask the legislator or staffer if they have questions or concerns, if they have insight about the context surrounding the issue, or how they are approaching this issue/bill. Thank them for sharing their insight and time.
- Make the "ask." For example, "Will you support/oppose this bill?" or "Will you work with us in amending this bill?"
- End with a thank you and any follow-up items that are needed. It is common for questions or needs to arise during conversations that will require follow-up after the meeting is over. Summarize what you will provide after the meeting.

After the meeting

- Write a thank-you email or letter. Briefly summarize the goal and ask that you discussed during the visit. Include any follow-up that was promised during the meeting. Offer to meet again or call them to further discuss.
- If the legislator is active on social media, consider tweeting or posting a positive note about meeting with the legislator.
- Provide an update to staff and/or relevant community partners and stakeholders about how the meeting went and any next steps or action items that are needed.

Concluding thoughts

Legislative advocacy is one of the most effective ways to achieve social change. This form of advocacy has been integral to the rape crisis movement's accomplishments, expanding options for survivors and strengthening prevention in communities. Rape crisis center advocates—whether they are new or have worked many years in this movement—have expertise that is unduplicated and of tremendous value in the context of policymaking. Thank you for using your voice to ensure public policies are responsive to the strengths and needs of victims and communities throughout the Commonwealth.

For training and technical assistance on effective policy advocacy, please contact Donna Greco, Policy Director, at dgreco@pcar.org or 717-728-9740, x114.



Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape

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