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Ten Tips for Visiting a Congressman

Communicating with a congressman is not the same as it once was. In the famous 1939 movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, young Senator Jefferson Smith, after arriving on Capitol Hill, goes to his office which consists of two rooms, two filing cabinets, and one moody secretary. That was all. Today, a small congressional office will hold at least seven staff members. A senior congressman may have as many as 18 people working for him. However, there is one thing that has certainly not changed since the first Continental Congress met.

Even in this day of express delivery, electronic mail, and Internet web sites, a personal visit to a congressional office is still the most effective way to register your opinion on a political topic. No matter what the Bill Gates of the world have to say about it, sitting down at a table, face-to-face conversation, remains the most effective form of communication. Unfortunately, it is not as easy as FedEx or convenient as e-mail.

When a federal legislative issue which may affect home schoolers is raised, volunteers can visit congressmen and senators in the nation's Capitol and alert thousands of home schoolers across the nation to call their legislators. This combination has proven successful time and time again.

Below are a few ground rules for a successful lobbying visit. Many of these tips were suggested by congressional staffers and based on the Federal Relations Department's collective lobbying experience.

1. Plan.

Be sure you have a specific goal in mind before you make an appointment with a congressman. Be familiar with what you are going to talk about, and, if possible, who will be coming with you, who you are going to meet with, etc. Also, lobbyists should keep notes on each meeting in order to record the congressman's position, what the meeting accomplished, and what follow-up is necessary.

2. Make appointments.

NEVER just walk into an office and expect to have a meeting—congressmen and staffers, like you, want to be prepared.

Don't be surprised if you are unable to schedule a meeting with a congressman. Most of the time a staff member will meet with you—congressmen are very busy. If you are a constituent, there is a much better chance that you will be able to meet with a Member of Congress directly.

When making an appointment, explain that you represent many home schoolers in their district or state. The Federal Relations Department has received letters from many state home school organizations designating us as representing them on Capitol Hill. If we are able to provide you with one of these letters for a specific congressman, you may be able to use the letter to meet directly with the congressman.

3. Be flexible.

NEVER schedule back-to-back meetings with two different congressmen because their schedules can be very tight and they may frequently be late. Be patient and expect delays. Also, consult a congressional directory to determine the location of offices in order to give yourself sufficient time to walk to the next appointment.

4. Wear appropriate attire.

Wearing appropriate clothing adds to your credibility. Men should *always* wear a coat and tie. Ladies should wear modest dresses, skirts, or a pantsuit. Remember, you're representing 1.7 million home schoolers. The impression you leave makes a difference!

5. Have *brief* material on hand.

Short handouts that explain the issues you are discussing can be very helpful to the Congressman who can simply give them to an aide when the meeting is over and have him or her follow up on the issue.

6. Use illustrations.

In order for the Congressman or staffer to remember your visit, you need to use personal stories and creative illustrations when you explain your position on an issue.

7. Take older children.

Whenever possible, take your children with you to the meetings. It is very important that the family is represented when you lobby for pro-family legislation. Make sure children are properly dressed, attentive, and quiet during the meeting. Your children may be called upon to answer some questions on the lobby issue or about home schooling, so it is important that they are familiar enough with the issue to articulate basic points. However, if your children are having a bad day or not yet able to sit quietly through a meeting, it would be better to leave them home than to present a bad testimony of the

Lord and home schooling. (Note: In light of the unpredictability of infants, we suggest moms leave infants at home or wait outside the office during meetings.)

8. Thank you letter.

After your meeting, send a follow-up letter to the congressman or staffer going over the main points of the meeting and thanking him for his time.

9. Dealing with staffers.

If you meet with a congressional staff member, keep a few things in mind:

- a. An average staffer is only 25 years old and is temporarily working in Washington because it looks good on his resume.
- b. Staffers are generally well educated.
- c. Most are single with no children. It is important to get on their level when you talk about parental rights issue because they often can't personally relate. Clever illustrations and personal experiences are very important tools.

10. Most importantly—show the love of Christ.

Be positive! Don't automatically expect a visit with a liberal office to be a failure. Your goal is to glorify God. Glorifying God is not contingent upon your persuading a congressman to vote your way. Every lobby visit is a heavenly success because you are proclaiming the Truth with a faithful testimony. In all circumstances, be certain to exercise the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control.