BLOG

# Q&A: Former House Chief of Staff Lea Sulkala

*Lea Sulkala served as a chief of staff to a Democrat in the U.S. House, as Senior Director for Federal Affairs at PhRMA and as Manager of Government Relations at the American Heart Association. She is now a principal at Resolution Public Affairs.*

*We spoke with Lea about how to conduct effective meetings with Congress, how offices view communication with constituents and outside groups and some mistakes to avoid. The conversation has been edited for length, clarity and style.*

## Tell us about the role that constituent communications play in a congressional office.

Having good constituent service is the most important thing that they can do as members of Congress. Hearing from constituents is really important. It's the best tool for keeping in touch with your district, especially as bills are moving through Congress. There is not always time to be walking the district and asking people, so offices rely on email, phone calls and meetings to get feedback.

## Offices get thousands of emails. How do you condense that into something usable?

The volume coming into any congressional office is huge. Every office has staff dedicated to taking mail and phone calls from constituents. We had a weekly log of everything coming in and tagged whatever issue it was related to. When we would sit down to have staff meetings with our policy team on issues, we would always have that kind of information from our legislative correspondent. Did we get any calls or emails on this? How many did we get? Was it a form letter or was there a personal story attached? We would always separate out personal stories.

## Is that a more valuable form of communication?

I think it's always more valuable, because you feel like the person took the time to write it, versus just blasting a note out. I mean, the notes are still tallied. But on an issue like healthcare or social security, we might even follow up with that constituent and invite them to an event or make sure that, when the vote happens on that issue, we sent them a separate letter saying, 'we want to let you know that we actually voted for what you wrote us on.'

## How about social media?

It's tricky, because it's out there for everyone to see. We would see who tweeted about us and who responded to our tweets. But I think the difference is that you don't know if it's your constituent. Social media is obviously hugely important, but it's more about your overall brand.

## When meeting with a congressional office, does it help to bring constituents?

Someone who is directly affected by a bill telling their story is a component you don't get from just having a government-affairs type meeting. When I was at the American Heart Association, it would be patients or heart disease survivors or someone who survived a stroke. When I was a PhRMA, it might be the researchers working on a drug. If someone's saying 'I spent 20 years developing that,' that's a story PhRMA wants to tell.

## What is the best way for an organization to go about getting a meeting with a congressional office?

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Most offices want to meet with constituents, so making the ask in the right way should get you a meeting. There needs to be a purpose. Really defining that purpose and identifying the staff member who's handling that issue is the most important part of it.

## Is there a major difference between meeting with a lawmaker and meeting with staff?

People think that maybe a staff-level meeting is lesser, and it's just not. If you're meeting with staff, they're often the one making the recommendations to the member anyway. And they may also be willing to elevate it. Often, they will say, 'you know, my member would really like to talk to you about this. Let's set up a second meeting.'

## Tell us how to conduct an effective meeting.

I think they should come in knowing what the 'ask' is. I think that's the most important thing. You want to have an intro, you want to make sure they know who you are and your connection to the district or the issue. But make sure you leave enough time to make a specific opportunity for follow up, whether it's 'there's a bill we care about,' or 'we'd like your boss to co sponsor this,' or 'we'd like them to sign this letter.' Have some kind of hook that shows action from the office, gives them something to do to show they're supportive, and it gives you a reason to follow up later.

## Do organizations often come in without an ask?

It does happen. I think some people get excited to have the meeting and tell their story, and that's fine because that is relationship building. But if there is something they need, and they don't mention it in the meeting, it probably wasn't a meeting best utilized.

## How did you deal with requests for time over an issue when your member has their position down and doesn't need to hear from different organizations?

The office would try to take almost every request for a meeting they could. When something is hot, it is important to hear different perspectives, because each group analyzes what's happening in a slightly different way. And those nuances are important to hear. If they were not weighing in, then you just kind of assumed that they didn't have a problem.

## Every group has reams of statistics, research and reports. How do you deal with that—is it helpful?

It's always helpful to have things that are specific to the district and state. They want to have statistics that they can reference in meetings or hearings or remarks. So I think anything that's quotable, or state- or district-specific, is really useful, especially now that members are trying to make sure that the quotes and statistics they're using are sourceable and they can say where they got them.

## Does it help if your organization is a campaign contributor?

It shouldn't matter to the official side. In most offices, the official staff doesn't really have insight into political donors. I think if someone came and said, 'you know, I made a political contribution' or 'I was at their campaign kickoff event,' it actually makes staff uncomfortable. So, you know, the chief and member may know, but it shouldn't come up in an official meeting.

## What about grassroots activity. Are there ever situations when the office gets resentful?

It can create stress for an office when there's a lot of incoming on an issue, but there's also recognition that it's part of being an elected official. There will be grassroots organizations and people writing in. The frustration comes when there is high volume or lots of people from outside the district.

## What are some things to avoid when meeting with an office?

Your group may not agree with the position of an office, but I think most offices are willing to have a cordial, friendly meeting. Coming in with animosity is not the best way to continue a relationship with an office. Don't provide ultimatums and don't combine politics with policy. Offices are very cognizant of the firewall between the political side and the official side.