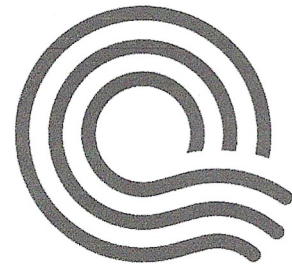


BLOG

# Meeting With Impact: Veteran Congressional Staffers Explain How to Make the Most of Facetime



At a time when almost all communication with public officials is digital, getting a face-to-face meeting—virtual or in person—is a real opportunity. The ability to communicate your impact and your needs authentically, bring constituents who tell real-life stories and hear lawmaker and staff perspectives on your issues firsthand can give you the edge. This is your opportunity to be heard—and that can be a challenge.



In most cases, your delegation will be meeting with a staffer who may track a dozen issue areas as part of their everyday workload. You're just one of many meetings that day. Congress is an environment where time is scheduled by the quarter hour, and a staffer's daily appointments often run to double digits. You generally have about 15 minutes to establish your value to the district or state, identify the bills or issues that matter to you, explain your position, bolster that position with a constituent story and make a definitive request. Your success will turn on how you use that time. If your argument does not resonate, it can easily get lost in the noise of a busy legislative office. ≡

Jimmy Keady, former chief of staff to a House Republican and a veteran of more than 50 political campaigns nationwide, likened it to the triage that goes on in a hospital emergency room. "Congressional staff are just absolutely piled-on daily," said Keady, who now owns JLK Political Strategies. "Between letters coming in from constituents, voting, understanding legislation coming down the pipe, media requests and managing the member's schedule, the things that got done were the things that were brought to our attention."

For government affairs teams, that means every meeting with a congressional office requires forethought in order to be successful. To help your team prepare, Quorum solicited expertise right from the source: high-level congressional staffers who spent years meeting with lobbyists, constituents, advocacy groups and government affairs professionals. We interviewed former chiefs of staff and other experts to see what resonated with them, what makes an effective meeting and where organizations most often go wrong. We spoke with Republicans and Democrats, men and women, House and Senate, and all were extremely candid.

The result is a report filled with insights to help your team, whether you have existing relationships on The Hill, are building them now or will be after redistricting and a new Congress is seated early next year. Staffers discussed everything from the importance of the district office to capitalizing on the relationships that lawmakers have with each other. To learn how you can engineer high-impact meetings and give your team the edge, read on.



## Start With the Staff

Every meeting with Congress requires a plan. Before you arrive, you should know the arguments you are bringing, what you are asking, who will do the talking and in what order. Perhaps most important, you should know as much as you can about the people seated across the table. In most cases, that will be staff members—and that's just fine.

Looking past the staff is a rookie mistake. While meeting directly with lawmakers is important, no legislator can stay completely current on the dozens of local, state and national issues that a congressional office has to deal with every year. That work is done by staff, many of whom have advanced degrees, years of experience and deep expertise. The person who is most knowledgeable about your issue, and often in the best position to do something about it, will generally be a legislative assistant, a legislative director or someone else with a staff title.

Because lawmakers are almost always overbooked, staff meetings are also easier to schedule. The numbers tell the story. There are 435 voting members in the House of Representatives. There are almost 9,000 staffers working in the

chamber, according to Quorum data. Setting meetings directly with lawmakers may also be getting more difficult. In Quorum's State of Government Affairs Survey, which queried almost 500 government affairs professionals about their experiences, one in three said it was harder to get facetime with federal lawmakers and public officials than in the past. All of this points to one important conclusion: a solid meeting with a knowledgeable staffer who commits to work with you is a win.

“People think that maybe a staff-level meeting is lesser, and it's just not,” said Lea Sulkala, former chief of staff to a House Democrat who has also served as Senior Director for Federal Affairs at PhRMA and Manager of Government Relations at the American Heart Association. “If you're meeting with staff, they're often the one making the recommendations to the member anyway,” said Sulkala, who is now a principal at Resolution Public Affairs. “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.’”

While all of our experts underlined the importance of staff, they also added a significant caveat: you have to meet with the right staffer. All successful meetings start with correctly navigating a congressional office and identifying the person who has jurisdiction over your issues. While that may seem obvious, every chief of staff has stories about organizations that come in unprepared, asking for an amorphous meeting. A good rule is to treat staff meetings as you would time with a lawmaker. Know the staffer you want to meet with. Know exactly what you want to discuss. Know what you are asking. Know their background and work history.

Smart organizations build relationships with multiple staff members, both in Washington and the district, because turnover is high in a workplace where wages are comparatively low and where elections threaten job security. ≡

“Congressional staff are overworked and underappreciated,” the policy think tank New America declared in its Congressional Brain Drain report, adding that, at least among junior staffers, “these kinds of wages and hours put the median staffer on par with truck drivers and oil-rig roustabouts.” That’s not just a snark. They looked at data.

Sulkala says advocacy organizations that want to meet over issues, particularly those that directly impact the district, are likely to get a green light if they make their request correctly. “Most offices want to meet with constituents, so making the ask in the right way should get you a meeting,” she said. “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.”

## Show Your Impact on the District

Securing the meetings you need is important. Communicating effectively when you get there is the next big hurdle, and that starts with explaining the impact your organization has on the congressional district or state. All of our experts said this was the information to deliver first.

“Saying ‘we employ this many people in your district’ or ‘we have this many members’ means there’s a direct impact—that should be your opening paragraph,” Keady said. “At the end of the day, congressional offices are paid by

the taxpayers to represent their district in a meaningful way. So when an interest <sup>III</sup> group or grassroots organization says ‘we’re coming up to The Hill and we represent 10,000 of your constituents,’ or even if it’s ‘we represent 50 of your constituents,’ that’s a big deal. A congressional office will move mountains to make sure that constituents are heard.”

While impact is often calibrated in the number of constituents or employees, there is room to get creative, including any data that shows your value. It might be products produced, patients treated, loans booked, charitable contributions, community grants or services provided. Choose the numbers that best show your organization’s impact and that fully support the narrative you are telling.

The mix of information may change over time. For example, this year a drug store chain might include the number of COVID vaccinations administered, but in future years that may be less important and would get replaced by different data. Whatever the numbers, make sure the team you are sending to the meeting is fully briefed.

“It matters how good your story is and it matters how you pitch it,” said Denzel McGuire, a former chief of staff to a Senate Republican and minority Staff Director of the Senate Budget Committee.

McGuire offers an example from her time as Executive Vice President for Federal and State Government Affairs at the Grocery Manufacturers Association (now the Consumer Brands Association). When meeting with lawmakers on Capitol Hill, she began leading with a study that showed grocery manufacturers were

one of the largest employers in American manufacturing, a fact that resonated with many lawmakers. “It was new data to them and it was interesting,” said McGuire, who is now a principal at McGuire LLC. “Make sure you are looking at your story through the lens of what’s important to the member. It just takes some creativity.”

Active preparation is also required, in order to show staffers and lawmakers you are serious, said Shrita Penn Hernandez, former communications director for a House Democrat. That means more than just communicating your impact. It means establishing a record on the issue you hope to influence.

“To gain respect, recognition and relationships, you have to build credibility,” she said. “Are you talking about your issues publicly in a way that’s meaningful and compelling? Are you in their local papers? Are you on their local television? Are you engaging with opinion leaders or influencers in communities they care about? You’ve got to condition the environment for that conversation, if you really want to have a conversation that goes somewhere.”

## **The Power of Constituent Stories**

While impact is generally about numbers, it’s the anecdotes that most often resonate. That’s why smart organizations provide constituent stories to fully illustrate their position. Bringing a constituent to your meeting is good business. It shows firsthand that you have a connection to the district, provides a face and a human story to illustrate your position and allows lawmakers and staff to ask questions.

“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,” Sulkala said.

“When I was at the American Heart Association, it would be patients or heart disease survivors or someone who survived a stroke.”

These stories have real value to a congressional office, which needs to track constituent sentiment closely. While there are polls and other tools to paint the broad strokes, personal stories provide the fine details and emotions that surround important issues. That’s why politicians at every level mention real people so often. Members of Congress do it in floor speeches. The President does it in the State of the Union address.

These stories bolster their positions in ways that polling numbers never could. Smart organizations hand-pick passionate and compelling constituents and deliver them in person, so lawmakers and staff can have authentic conversations.

“Frankly, you want a conversation that your member of Congress could repeat if he or she was at a dinner party,” McGuire said. “They use these stories, and you may not even see them use it. They might use that story to have a conversation with their friend on the floor or to have a conversation with somebody in their district.”

Finding the right stories is as simple as paying attention to your grassroots program. Smart teams are consistently asking advocates to contribute personal stories. To prepare for your meeting, you need only drill down into the advocate

messages for that lawmaker and choose the story you want to elevate.



## Make 'The Ask' Correctly

Here's a suggestion that may seem obvious: make sure you are clear about exactly what you want from a congressional office and communicate it directly. While most would say that is the entire purpose of a congressional meeting, all of our experts had stories about organizations that failed to explain how the congressional office could actually help.

“It does happen,” Sulkala said. “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.”

Lawmakers and staff are used to requests for action, so ask for what you want, whether it is co-sponsoring a bill, signing a letter, mentioning an issue in a floor speech, meeting with someone in the district or other activities. One professional move McGuire suggests is to ask a supportive lawmaker to approach their colleagues in the chamber. The truth is that lawmakers talk to one another during votes and events, and they have their own relationships. Tapping into that can be powerful, but you have to understand who is friendly with whom. McGuire, who worked in Senate Republican leadership, understood that matrix.

“I knew which members had relationships,” she said. “I found it very helpful to encourage members to have conversations with each other. It requires some subtlety, because you have to know which senators spend time together and which Senators are friends.”

Whatever action you are seeking from a congressional office, staffers say that being direct is the best approach. “Thank them, ask what more you can do to be helpful, what more you can do to move the position or issue forward and then ask them to do specific things to be helpful,” McGuire said. “By doing this, the member or staffer feels appreciated and that you are willing to put the work in before you ask them for additional assistance on the issue.”

## Diversity is a Requirement

Congress is becoming more diverse, with the number of women, LGBTQ lawmakers and lawmakers of color increasing. While there is a long way to go to achieve truly equal representation, real progress was made in recent election cycles.

Government affairs teams, by contrast, have struggled. A Public Affairs Council report last year showed that just 17% of public affairs staff were people of color, lower than the percentage in Congress and in the U.S. population generally.

Yet diversity is a necessary ingredient to communicate effectively with Congress, said Shrita Penn Hernandez, a former Vice President for Communications and Marketing at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation “We all should be


aware of blind spots,” said Hernandez, who is now Chief Communications Officer and Vice President for Communications at the Urban Institute. “I think the first step to bridging the gap is to understand that awareness is important and that representation matters. There has to be an intentional effort to invite diverse voices, experiences and perspectives to the table.”

Increasing diversity can impact everything from strategy to messaging because it increases your team’s understanding of life in the states and districts that lawmakers represent. “Regardless of whether it’s a Hispanic community, rural community, Black community, Asian or other underrepresented community, when people do not feel represented there’s sometimes a lack of trust,” she said. “It is important to understand the community concerns before you can represent them. Representation matters. Deep connections to those communities matter. Understanding the lived experiences matters.”

## Meeting With the Opposition

In any congressional meeting, much will turn on whether the office is friendly to your position or whether it stands in opposition. Meetings with friendlies tend to get down to business quickly. You agree on the issue so the conversation turns to what can be done.


Talking with opponents is very different. As most government affairs professionals understand, no one meeting is going to change a lawmaker’s position. In addition, the increasingly partisan environment may be making

conversations like this more difficult. The State of Government Affairs Survey  showed that almost two thirds of government affairs professionals say that polarization is making advocacy harder.

Still, staffers say there are benefits to these meetings and that, over time, they can be used to change minds, or at least mitigate opposition. “If a person is not supportive or neutral, try to understand why they have that position,” McGuire said. “It is not because they are dumb or mean. Try to think like they think, and then how you can adjust your argument or assertion in a way that would be appealing. Change your message based on your audience.”

McGuire offers several examples from her days at the Grocery Manufacturers Association, when the organization was arguing in favor of genetically modified food (an issue known by the shorthand GMOs). “To get Democrats on board during the GMO debate, we stated that if you believe in the science of climate change, you need to believe in the science of GMOs,” she said. “We pointed to how GMOs are essential to getting crops to grow in a world where pests and droughts are more frequent, and the population is increasing.”

For Republican and Democratic lawmakers representing poorer districts, McGuire said, they advanced a different argument. “They were receptive to the fact that the anti-GMO movement was driven by those who had significant disposable income to pay the higher prices for organic food, and that an anti-GMO policy would make food more expensive,” she said.

Before you go into a meeting, McGuire suggests thinking about how you might  convince someone in a book club or at a family dinner to rethink their position. The idea is to plant a seed that can grow into a more evolved position on the issue.

“For example, at the time, many of my friends were wealthy women who got their food information from wealthy internet influencers,” she said. “To break that mentality, I pointed out to them a high-density housing unit where many immigrants live and asked, ‘do you think all the folks there are getting their tomatoes grown in someone’s backyard with a hose?’ I know it sounds silly, but that simple statement got them to understand food is a mass production because there are more mouths to feed in this world than the customers they see at the farmers market or Whole Foods.”

When you meet with offices that oppose your position, one universal recommendation from all of our experts was to keep things polite and professional. “Your group may not agree with the position of an office, but I think most offices are willing to have a cordial, friendly meeting,” Sulkala said. “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.”

# Follow Up Effectively



The last piece of a successful meeting is effective follow up. Most staffers are receptive to “leave behind” materials, though they are more helpful in a digital format that can be found quickly in an email search than they are on paper. But real follow up goes further.

McGuire suggests setting the stage before the meeting ends. “You can ask, ‘what are you going to do with this information? Are you going to talk to the senator?’ Be very pointed. Say, ‘can we follow up with you in a week and hear if you’ve talked to your Senator?’ Put some pressure on that. And, last but not least, if it’s a friendly office, ask what you can do to be helpful.”

Follow ups that explain what your organization is doing on an issue, what you are telling your advocates and what you have planned can also be helpful, because congressional offices cannot track everything. Remember too that staffing in Congress can be thankless work, and that genuine appreciation goes a long way.

Gifts and food are out of the question, prevented by law, but personal notes resonate.

“As congressional staff, we always knew what we did wrong but we never knew what we did right,” Keady said. “A ‘thank you for taking the time’ goes a long way, particularly with the vitriol that comes from everywhere. I remember a group that came in and the member couldn’t meet with them, so I had to fill in.

A week later, I got a really nice note from the director saying, ‘Hey, we might not always agree, but we really appreciate you taking the meeting and thank you for everything.’ They didn’t have to do that. Of course, the next time that guy called me, I said, ‘sure, I can try to fit you in.’ At the end of the day, this is about relationships.”

## Checklist for High-Impact Meetings

Here are some items to address when meeting with members of Congress and staff, whether virtual or in person.

- **Do Your Homework.** Know the background of the lawmaker and staff you are meeting; the election outlook for the member; and the demographics and economics of the district.
- **State Your Mission.** Make sure the office understands exactly why you are there. Be clear about your agenda.
- **Communicate Your Impact.** Explain how your organization impacts the lawmaker’s district using compelling, well-chosen metrics.
- **Bring a Constituent.** Including a constituent with an interesting story provides an anecdote that lawmakers and staff can use.
- **Anticipate Questions.** Be prepared to field queries of all kinds. If you cannot answer, promise a response and follow up.
- **Make Your ‘Ask’ Clear.** Know what you want and explain exactly what the lawmaker or staffer can do to help.

- **Ask What You Can Do.** Offer to dedicate resources to the issue or help in whatever way is most impactful.
- **Follow Up.** Thank participants for meeting and send them succinct follow-up materials through digital channels.
- **Use Your Grassroots.** If it is helpful, run advocacy campaigns to show your issue is meaningful to constituents.
- **Show Appreciation.** When a lawmaker or staff member helps your organization (by taking a meeting, for example), show your appreciation with personal notes and public posts.
- **Extend an Invitation.** Extend a standing invitation for the lawmaker or staffer to visit your facility in the district.