

CONGRESSIONAL

RECESS TOOLKIT

2017

Organizing for Action

TOWN HALL MEETINGS

When members of Congress (MOCs) are back in their districts during a congressional recess, many hold public meetings such as town halls, listening sessions, and office hours. These events are opportunities for constituents to interact directly with their MOCs and their staff, ask questions about where they stand on issues, share concerns, and press for answers on policy proposals, legislation, and their stances on upcoming votes.

Find out when and where the town hall meeting will be

Even though the purpose of a town hall meeting is for constituents and MOCs to talk with one another, notice of a public meeting might not be posted until the last minute—if at all. If you're not already a subscriber, add yourself to your MOCs' email lists, and be sure to check your MOCs' websites and social media accounts regularly so you know when and where to be for the meeting. If you don't see any announcement of a town hall meeting, call your MOCs directly to find out when and where their next public meetings will be.

Making the most of your time at a town hall meeting

Use the best practices below make the most impact at your town hall meetings:

I. PREPARING FOR THE TOWN HALL MEETING

You don't need to wait until you find when a MOC will hold a public meeting to prepare for it. In fact, preparing for public meetings now means you will be better able to execute your plan as you find out when public meetings will be held.

Form a group of fellow constituents

Asking others to join you at a town hall meeting will help amplify your message and shows more community support for the issue you care about—and gives you more chances to ask a question on the record.

Prepare questions for your group to ask

Work with the members of your action group to come up with questions prior to the meeting. After you agree on the questions you will ask, distribute the list to everyone who will attend. It's unlikely

that everyone in your group will be able to ask a question; however, preparing questions ahead of time gives you the best opportunity to get answers from a MOC, ensures questions are not repeated, and makes sure no one's mind goes blank when handed a microphone.

- **All questions should be on a single issue.** To maximize your impact, keep all of your questions focused on that issue, for example, Obamacare.
- **Fuse personal with policy.** Questions should include how you personally will be impacted by a policy. Your personal story is a powerful organizing tool that helps you connect with others and move them to take action, including MOCs. *Everyone has a personal story but if you're not sure how to share yours, you can use the worksheet on pages 11-12 as a guide. You can also browse other people's personal stories [here](#).*
- **Get a commitment.** Questions should be pointed and end with asking for a commitment from the MOC. For example, "will you commit you will not take away health insurance from 32 million Americans, including thousands right here in this district?"

Determine roles

Make sure there are people in your group who will record the meeting on video, with pictures, and on Facebook Live. Then, determine who will use social media to reach out to the press and others about what's going on inside the town hall meeting. Make a staffing plan, with back-up roles, ahead of time so everyone's clear on what their role is during the town hall meeting. Remember—take video and pictures or the event didn't happen! Post these pictures and videos to social media throughout the town hall meeting using #CareNotChaos. Don't forget to tag the press!

II. AT THE TOWN HALL MEETING

Get there early

Town hall meetings will likely fill up fast. Meet up with your group before going in, quickly review the questions you'll ask and the roles people will fill.

Spread out

Sitting by yourself or in pairs throughout the front half of the room will make the perception of broad consensus a reality for your MOC. It also maximizes your chance to ask a question. Applaud when someone in your group (or another person with a question that aligns with your issue) asks a question to show wide support.

Don't bring signs

Bringing signs will result in the MOC's staff steering clear of you and handing the mic to someone who looks more friendly or neutral. The same goes for buttons and t-shirts. Look as neutral as possible at the town hall.

Stick to the script

The questions you worked on as a group feed off one another. Stick to these questions so your strategy for getting answers can play out as fully as possible. You can even read it straight from the list of questions!

Be respectful and persistent

It's your job to get answers from the MOC. In some cases, they might dodge your question or only give you half an answer. You should always be respectful, but call out a MOC if he or she is dodging your question and ask for a real answer.

Record everything

Record the interaction between people in your group and MOCs (if laws allow it). Having a video of a MOC answering a question in their own words is one of the most impactful ways to move our issues forward. An interaction can be picked up by local and national media and spread all over social media as well. Don't forget about Facebook Live! It's a powerful tool to bring the action of a town hall to your community—and the press. Don't forget to use the hashtag #CareNotChaos

III. "EMPTY CHAIR" TOWN HALL *(if there is no Member of Congress in attendance)*

Welcome, goals, and agenda

Before getting started, make sure everyone is signed in. Then begin the meeting by reviewing goals and agenda. Be sure to mention if a member of Congress (MOC) was invited, but didn't attend—then pivot to the messages you wanted to communicate to that particular MOC.

Share personal stories

Have 2-3 individuals share their story about why these issues and policies are important to their lives and/or the lives of their family or friends.

Record questions

Ask the audience what questions they would've asked their MOC if he or she had joined the event. Ideally, you can write these down on a whiteboard or butcher paper, then take a picture to tweet

at that MOC. Conversely, you can also use Facebook Live to stream a video of you asking these questions in real time, or record them and tweet the videos of attendees asking the questions directly at the MOC using their official Twitter handle.

What you can do?

Review next steps, which could include digital actions, working with partner organizations, and calling and writing to your members of Congress. One next step would be to schedule a visit to your MOC's office to try to speak with him or her directly. See the website for more information on visiting your local elected official's office.

Wrap up

Thank attendees for coming, and follow the "After the town hall meeting" section for next steps.

IV. AFTER THE TOWN HALL MEETING

Share what you heard

This is where we show the momentum we have for our issue. Provide your account of what happened at the town hall meeting on social media, including Facebook Live. You can tweet or post at members of the press, the MOC, and other supporters of your issue. **Join Connect**, OFA's online conversation platform, to share your experience with other OFA organizers.

Report back

Please fill out the **OFA event report-back form** to tell us all about your event. And, as always, please share a wrap up and pictures of your event on **Connect**, OFA's online community organizing tool bringing volunteers, supporters, and staff together to take action.

VISITING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL'S OFFICE

The ultimate goal of organizing around the issues you care about is to persuade elected officials to support your position on those issues. We use a variety of tactics to achieve this goal—one of the most effective being an in-person visit to an elected official's office. Meeting face-to-face with an elected official or his/her staff is your opportunity to share your story with the people who represent you in making policy decisions. This guide will help you prep for your office visit and ensure your time with your elected official or his/her staff is as effective and efficient as possible.

Why visit your elected official

Visiting an elected official's office and speaking with him or her might seem like a job for someone else. Here's the thing, though: Elected officials want to hear from you. They make decisions based on what they hear from their constituents. Speaking directly with your elected officials in person puts the issue you care about on their radar. Meeting with them in person also helps you build a relationship with them and their staff, which is the first step in building trust and gaining their ear.

Think about it this way: If elected officials don't hear anything about the issue you care about, they don't know people need them to make it a priority.

I. PREPARING TO VISIT YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

Choosing who you should visit

Elected officials make decisions about the issue you care about; however, not all issues come across the desks of all elected leaders and not all elected leaders are open to your position on an issue. Use these three questions to help determine which elected leader(s) you should target, set a realistic goal for your visit, and select the proper tactic to move your issue forward:

Is your issue handled at the local, state, or national level? Visiting the office of the right elected official is key to moving your issue forward. Does the issue you care about impact your immediate community? If so, this might be an issue best handled by your city council member, mayor, or other

local official. Conversely, a big issue such as the Affordable Care Act is best handled by state or national elected officials. Learn more about how to find out which level of government handles your issue in the guide in the next section!

What is the goal of your visit? Research your elected leader’s position on the issue they care about. Are they on the fence about the issue and potentially open to hearing your position? If so, you’ll want to pay a visit to that elected official’s office to persuade them to support your side. For elected officials who already support your position, visit their office to say thank you and ask them to continue supporting the issue—they do not often hear this! If the elected official is vehemently opposed to your stance on the issue, persuading them otherwise might not be the most effective use of your time. In this case, a visit to express your disappointment is valid, so long as you are cordial and positive. Learn more about how to find out your elected official’s stance on your issue in the guide in the next section.

Which tactic should you use? There are three types of office visits:

1 Drop-in Visit

A **drop-in visit** is when an individual stops in to express their stance on an issue. Because office visits should show elected officials that an abundance of people in a community stand with you on a given issue, drop-ins are most effective when they occur in a steady stream throughout the day or a period of days. Pro-tip: Be sure to sign in with the staff and log the issue you came to talk about. Leave some material about your issue, too.

2 Sit-down Meeting with a Staffer

A **sit-down meeting with a staffer** should be scheduled in advance, be attended by at least a handful of people, and should have an agenda. This is your opportunity to ask staffers about the elected official’s position, discuss concerns about the issue at hand, show community support for the issue, and to share meaningful personal stories about how this issue impacts constituents. The elected official’s staff play a considerable role in shaping political decisions, so talking with staff is a great way to influence the decision maker.

3 Sit-down Meeting with an Elected Official

A **sit-down meeting with the elected official** should follow the same structure as a sit-down meeting with staff, but it is an opportunity to talk to and hear from the elected official directly. This is a powerful opportunity to directly influence the elected official’s view on an issue.

Learning more about your elected officials

Use this chart to help you find the elected officials who represent you, how to get in touch with them for your office visit, and what they've said in the past about the issue you care about.



Federal level:

Represented by one congressman or woman and two senators

Every Congressman and Senator has a website—after you find out who represents you at the federal level, find their official website to review their stances on the issues, office locations, phone numbers, and email addresses.

[FIND YOUR CONGRESSMAN](#)

[FIND YOUR SENATORS](#)



State level:

Represented by a governor and a legislative body

State governments are organized differently based on each state's constitution. That said, each state has a governor and a legislative body that makes laws for all citizens of that state. Your governor is your state's highest ranking official—her responsibilities include, among many other duties, signing bills into law and ensuring the laws are carried out. State legislatures are the law-making bodies of each state's government. Each state (except Nebraska) has two separate chambers or houses: the Senate, which is the smaller chamber, and the House of Representatives or Assembly, which is the larger chamber.

[FIND YOUR GOVERNOR](#)

[FIND YOUR LEGISLATORS](#)



Local level:

The structure of local government varies greatly, so search online to find out how it works, who represents you, and how to contact them at the local level.

Below the state level, there are counties and municipalities that generally take responsibility for parks and recreation services, police and fire departments, housing services, emergency medical services, municipal courts, transportation services (including public transportation), and public works (streets, sewers, snow removal, signage, and so forth).

Now that you know this, you should feel prepared to find out not only which official you will be visiting, but how to contact them as well. Next, we will talk about the different kinds of office visits you can use when visiting your elected official.

Talking about your issue effectively (You don't need to be an expert.)

We are always most effective when we talk about our issue by combining key facts, values, and personal stories.

Key facts can be statistics or other concrete figures that support your case. You don't need to be an expert to talk to your elected officials. Memorizing a few key facts, however, supports your case and will make it even more compelling. Furthermore, one way to make key facts even more compelling is to make them local to the area your elected official represents. Make sure you come prepared with key facts from credible, independent sources that you can share with your elected official on your issue of focus.

Values are deeply held beliefs, which transcend issues or political affiliations, that can serve as a bridge between individuals—even if they're divided on an issue, they often support the same outcomes. Some examples of values held dear by many Americans are that all people are created equal, that hard work and responsibility should be rewarded, and that we all must play a role in creating a better future for the next generation. It's important to connect with your elected official on your values—they provide common ground for you and your elected official to discuss what is best for the community, even in the face of disagreement around the solutions to your issue. You should think of your stance on an issue as policy you wish to be implemented that are based on a common set of values.

Personal stories are examples of how a specific issue has impacted your life. They're one of the most powerful tools we have for winning others over on the issues, because stories allow us to put a human face on the issue, making it less abstract and more accessible. For example, if you have children and live in a coastal city, and your issue is climate change, you might tell a story about your growing concern that rising sea levels could displace your family or even your children or grandchildren.

In some cases, you may find it difficult to respond to statements made by your elected officials or their staff in opposition to your issue. It's OK if you're not sure how to respond to these points. It's crucial to remember to bring the conversation back to the values, personal stories, and key facts that drive you to fight for this issue.

Now that we have covered what you need to do to prepare, you should feel empowered to visit your elected official. In the next section, we'll provide some resources to make sure your office visit is successful.

II. EXECUTING YOUR OFFICE VISIT

Visiting your elected official

We have talked about why it's important to visit your elected officials, as well as covered steps to prepare for your visit. But let's consider for a moment that you're now on your way—what's on your agenda? How will you amplify your visit? These are questions we will address in this section.

Sample agenda for a sit-down meeting

While we have talked about how you should prepare, you're probably still wondering about what the play-by-play of an office visit looks like. Though several people should attend a sit-down meeting, one person should lead the conversation. Below is a sample agenda you may use and modify for your meeting.

PART 1: Introductions

- **Introduce those who are in the room, including any organizational affiliations they have.**
- **Explain the purpose of the visit: to talk about a given issue, find out where the elected official stands, and identify the best way to move this issue forward.**

PART 2: The issue

- **Ask the elected official or staff:**
 - What is the elected official's stance on this issue?
 - What are the elected official's concerns about it?
- **Address the elected official's concerns using examples from your own experience and the key statistics you researched.**
- **Explain why the meeting attendees support your position on the issue.**
 - Call on a few meeting attendees with compelling stories to share why they support your position on the issue. It's not always necessary, but having a relevant expert voice as part of the conversation can also be beneficial. This person could be from a partner group or local university, for example.
 - Remember that the most effective way to discuss the issues is by combining key facts, values, and personal stories (see the "Talking about your issue effectively" section above for more information).

PART 3: Next steps

- **Offer to send follow-up information that addresses the elected official's concerns.**
- **Use this meeting as an opportunity to build your chapter's relationship with the office—ask for a follow-up meeting to discuss the issue further.**
- **Remind the the staffer that your group will be excited to thank the elected official should they come out in support of this issue.**

Tactics to amplify your office visit

Office visits primarily serve to put your support for the issue onto your elected official's radar. However, another key part of any issue campaign strategy is to shape a public narrative that support for your issue is broad in your community. Remember to make sure your office visit is publicized to the greatest degree possible, so that you have a chance to win over the general public and add your voice to a broader chorus of voices fighting for the issue.

Take plenty of photos. Every office operates with different rules; some will allow you to take photos inside, and others will not. Make sure to follow the rules of the office, but if possible, take as many photos as you can to document your visit. If photos are not allowed inside, take some outside the office door, ideally where the name of the elected official is visible, as a way to document your visit. Make sure to be considerate of others when taking photos.

Consider earned media. Depending on the situation, earned media may be an appropriate and strategic way to amplify your office visit to the broader public. There are many factors to consider when deciding whether an event is media worthy—for some general guidelines on this, consult [OFA's Earned Media Guide](#). As with photos, the press may or may not be allowed in elected officials' offices. If press is not allowed, but you still consider your visit media worthy, consider hosting a short press conference outside the office before or after the visit. To keep the tenor positive, consider notifying the elected official's office if you'll be inviting members of the press.

Remember that amplifying your organizing activities is a key part of issue advocacy. Try to follow this mantra: Pics, or it didn't happen.

III. AFTER YOUR OFFICE VISIT

After your office visit, you'll want to make sure you amplify the work that you did. There are a few key ways to make sure you share your best practices, as well as share your successes and challenges, with your community members and organizers across the country.

Post the story of your visit on Connect. Share your wrap-up in your local/state and National groups on Connect. Be sure to give some background on the issue you're working on, where you're working, some photos from your visit, and your favorite anecdotes from the visit.

Amplify the visit online. Use social media—especially Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—to summarize the event as a whole, thank those who participated, and reinforce the overall message of the event. These posts should include photos, and can also include a call to take further action in the future, whether you want to promote an upcoming event or other ways to get involved online.

Thank your elected official and their staff. Don't forget to take a moment to thank the office for hosting you and hearing your position.

SHARING YOUR PERSONAL STORY

At a town hall meeting, you will be in direct contact with members of Congress (MOC), the press, and other community members. Connecting your personal story—the reason you’re out at a town hall meeting and not sitting at home—to the policy outcome you want to see centers the discussion on the real impact a MOC’s decision has on his or her constituents. Your personal story will be the foundation for the commitment you’ll ask the MOC to make—*will you commit to supporting your constituents’ needs?*

As you begin writing your personal story, consider and respond to the following questions:

1) Why do you care about defending Obamacare?

2) Why is your story important for your MOC to hear? Why are you at the town hall meeting?

3) What commitment do you want your MOC to make

Begin writing your personal story. Think of a key life moment in which Obamacare helped you or a friend. Consider the challenge you faced, the choice you made, and the outcome that came about as a result of your choice. Remember to finish by asking the MOC to commit to defending it.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing a personal story. The box is centered on the page and occupies most of the vertical space below the introductory text.