



Section 9

Building Relationships with Your Legislator

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Building Relationships with Your Legislator

You've met with your legislator, discussed issues facing unemployed and underemployed women in your community and what your program does to alleviate them, and made an "ask." But your work isn't over yet. Building and sustaining a relationship with your legislator over the long term is one of the best things you can do to further the advocacy goals of your organization.

Supportive legislators can champion your issues and provide you with useful political information. In return, you can give them the expert's input they need to make policy decisions. Some legislators will not be open to cooperation, but the ones who are can become your greatest allies in the policy arena. In this tool, you will learn what steps you can take to cultivate a long-term relationship with your legislator.

Follow Up After the Meeting

The process of building the relationship starts a few days after your meeting.

Send a thank you note. Always send a thank you note to the legislator and any staff you met with. The note is an opportunity to reiterate the points you made in your meeting and to reaffirm any commitments that were made on your part or on the legislator's. You should also include any materials or information the legislator asked for or that you did not get a chance to deliver at the meeting. In closing, mention that you are looking forward to working with the legislator on your issues in the future.



See Section 3, Appendix 2 of Women Work!'s Advocacy Toolkit for a sample thank you letter. You should customize your letter to reflect the specific items discussed during your meeting.

Continue to send updates and publications. This is a good way to let the legislator know about your organization's work and successes. If your program or one of your clients receives an award, send a news clipping to the legislator. Or if you publish an important report, send a copy. This will keep the legislator updated on your issues and remind them of your efforts on behalf of unemployed and underemployed women.

Examples of items you can send:

- Newsletters
- News about graduation and awards
- Annual summary reports
- Other publications, such as analyses of women's employment needs in your area

Invite the Legislator to Get Involved

Host the legislator at a site visit. One way to follow up on a meeting is to let your legislator see your work for themselves. Invite them to meet your organization's staff and clients at your program.



For tips on how to arrange a successful site visit, see Section 1 of the Advocacy Toolkit.

Present the legislator with an award. Has the legislator been supportive of issues important to your organization? One way to thank them is to honor them with an award for their work. The award ceremony can take place at your site or at their office. Make sure that the award is presented for a specific reason, e.g. "We want to honor the Assemblywoman for her efforts to increase funding levels for women's training programs." A note of caution: make sure that the actual award is allowable under ethics guidelines (a general rule for federal lawmakers is that it should not have monetary value).

Make Contacts with the Legislator's Team

Don't overlook the staff. Since the legislator's time is limited, he or she will usually rely on staff for information and opinions on key issues. A connection to an influential staff member can be almost as useful as a connection to the legislator themselves, as the staffer can act as the legislator's "gatekeeper" on your issues.

ACTION WORKS! QUICK TIP

Select the appropriate staff member to reach out to.

Identify the appropriate staff member to contact for your requests (it will likely be the one responsible for Labor, Education, or Women's issues, or the Scheduler for visits). If you are able to build a good relationship with a trusted staffer, they may be able to champion your issues with the legislator.

Many of the techniques that work for building relationships with a legislator are also effective for building a relationship with staff members, including:

- Sending thank you notes and updates
- Inviting them to visit your site
- Offering to help find useful information (see below)

Be helpful and understanding. Staff members are good at their jobs when they can help their boss achieve success. So providing them the materials they need to do this is key.

Keep in mind that staff are often overworked and underpaid, so anything you can do to save them time will be appreciated.

Become an Expert

Volunteer to provide information. The legislator or staff may ask you to find information about an issue you are working on – for example, how many women live below the poverty line in your district, or what percentage of graduates from the local community college are single mothers. You may have the resources to be able to answer the legislator’s questions and by doing so, you can present yourself as the expert on these issues. Take opportunities to offer your assistance: encourage the legislator and staff to come to you with future inquiries.



To learn how to effectively use timely and accurate data in your advocacy work, see Section 6 of the Advocacy Toolkit.

Follow the issues. Know what action is being taken on your issues in the legislator’s political arena. This will allow you to time opportunities to offer your assistance and input. Also, it is useful to know what issues are particularly important to the legislator, in order to find common ground and target your arguments more precisely.

Future Connections

Meet with the legislator as necessary. Once you have a relationship with a legislator, it will be easier to set up a meeting whenever an important issue comes up. You can meet in the Capitol when their legislative body is in session or in their district office when they are on recess. Continue the pattern of presenting your arguments and offering your assistance, and always remember to say thank you!

ACTION WORKS! QUICK TIP

Work with the schedule.

Get to know the legislative schedule so you can set up visits in advance. You can find Congress’ 2008 schedule at <http://www.nps.gov/legal/recess.htm>; local bodies will have their own schedules.