

The Importance of Hill Visits.

It is a critical time for legislators to hear from their state's public health leaders. The legislative agenda for the coming year will include key legislation affecting public health and health education research and practice.

One of the first items of business each year is for the Congress to draft a budget for fiscal year. This is the best time for you to voice your opinion about what federal programs are important. It's best to make yourself heard early in the budget process.

While CNHEO actively advocates on many of these issues, constituents add a powerful voice to the debate. Now is the time to request meetings with your members of Congress. CNHEO staff would be glad to accompany anyone making a first-time visit. Please notify [Eleanor Dixon-Terry](#) of your appointments, including the member of Congress, time and date.

Advocacy and Lobbying: What's the Difference?

CNHEO understands that many state employees have restrictions on the types of activities in which you may participate. Although most people use the words interchangeably, it is important to understand the distinction between advocacy and lobbying. The legal definition of lobbying usually involves attempting to influence specific legislation, while advocacy covers a much broader range of activities that may or may not include lobbying.

For example, a group could picket or boycott a store in order to prevent the sale of a particular product. This action is considered advocacy and might cause the store to discontinue selling the product. However, if the effort is not successful, the group might then urge the city council to pass an ordinance that prohibits the sale of the product. That action would be considered lobbying because it involves directly influencing legislation. *Lobbying refers specifically to advocacy efforts that attempt to influence legislation.* This distinction is helpful to keep in mind because it means that laws limiting lobbying might not govern other advocacy activities. While many equate the two, most advocacy is not lobbying.

CNHEO encourages its members to engage in advocacy activities that are permissible according to applicable state regulations. As you are in an excellent position to know what policies work and what policies need improvement, you can make a case for improving the public health system. Policymakers respect your input because your solutions are based on experience in the field.

How to Advocate

There are many ways that you can effectively advocate for the overall public health community as well as the specific needs of families. One way is to educate members of Congress about what health education is and how states are using federal dollars to address the needs of communities. If members of Congress don't know about programs, they are less likely to support them.

You may be asking yourself, "Why bother?" or "What can I do?" The following excerpts from the Association of Public Health Laboratory's advocacy guide, *"Taking Action for Public Health Laboratories, How to Participate in the Legislative Process, A Handbook of Nuts and Bolts: What, How and Why,"* can answer your questions.

Why Bother?

You have a demanding job. A lot to do in too few hours. You may be deeply cynical about a Congress that seems too preoccupied with highly political matters to pay much attention to public health issues. Why should you take the time to get involved with policy makers?

A. You are a constituent. Elected legislators pay more attention to communications from their constituents than from any other source.

B. You understand the health education needs in your community. You have special credibility because of your training and experience. The member of Congress is elected to address the needs in his district or state. They depend on constituents to identify gaps in their communities that need addressing.

C. Everyone is in favor of protecting the public's health. They just don't know exactly what public health is or what it means. If you don't explain what your public health program does, no one else will.

D. With thousands of pieces of legislation introduced each session, members and their staff can't know all subjects thoroughly. They rely on you to tell them what works and what does not.

But first...Please educate yourself on your department's policies regarding contact with federal and state legislators.

How to Schedule a Meeting with Your Legislator or their Staff

- Find your representatives in the [House](#) and [Senate](#).
- Find the name of the person in the member's Capitol Hill office assigned to health. You can call your member's office via the Capitol Switchboard: (202) 224-3121.
- Once you have the name, call the office and schedule an appointment.
- Please notify [Eleanor Dixon-Terry](#) of the time and date of your appointment.
- When you are able to reach staff (some persistence may be required), explain the purpose of your calls to schedule a visit to explain what health education is and its importance to your state.

Prepare for the Meeting

- Do some homework; this need not be time-consuming.
- Find out the legislator's committee assignments. You can get this information either by calling the district office, or visiting www.house.gov.

- Prepare a one-page fact sheet for the member of Congress that summarizes the most important things you want to get across. You might already have a fact sheet to which you can add specific information about local needs.

During the Meeting

- Arrive on time.
- Deliver your message quickly. Expect to be asked questions.
- When a legislator asks you how he/she can help, be succinct in your explanation. NEVER disagree, argue or threaten. Make your case in positive terms and be pleasant.
- Offer your time and assistance if he or she wants to talk about public health or the health problems in your community. Leave behind your business card and any fact sheets on your issues and needs.
- Follow-up with a thank you letter.

Working with Legislative Staff

Federal legislators rely heavily on their staff, in both the district offices and on Capitol Hill. Every member of the House of Representatives and every senator has a staff aide assigned expressly to deal with health issues; however, this does not mean that the staffer is an expert in all health issues. It is worthwhile to establish a relationship with these individuals, as it is their job to help their boss respond to constituents' concerns. Staffers try to be responsive to constituents and to credible offers of expert help that come at the right time.

Other Resources

- [How to Visit Members of Congress](#) (from American Mathematical Society)
- [Tips for a Successful Visit to a Legislator](#) (from American Friends Service Committee)