



Making Your Voice Heard

How to Meet with Your Legislator and Advocate for the Issues You Care About

Meeting with your elected officials and their staff is one of the most effective ways to influence policy. In-person meetings help develop relationships that are vital to making sure that your legislators understands the issues you care about.

Many people believe they need to be a lobbyist in order to schedule meetings with their legislators. This just isn't so. Whether you are a leader in your community, a business owner, a parent, or a student, your opinion matters and you too can organize effective meetings with your legislators. To get started, follow these tips:

Scheduling a Meeting

Meetings should be requested about three weeks in advance, although the scheduling process varies slightly from office to office. You can call the office and ask them how they prefer to receive requests for meetings. Whether or not the request is written or verbal, it should include: your name and organization or business (if applicable), the names and affiliations of other participants, how long you would like to meet, and the purpose of the meeting.

Always follow up with a phone call or email. For example, if you request the meeting over the phone, you should send an email reviewing the details of the call and thanking them for taking the request. If you send the initial request by email, call the office the next day to make sure your request didn't get lost in the shuffle.

If your legislator is unavailable, schedule a meeting with the staff person working on agricultural and environmental issues. These staffers have a large amount of influence and can be an advocate for you and your issues.

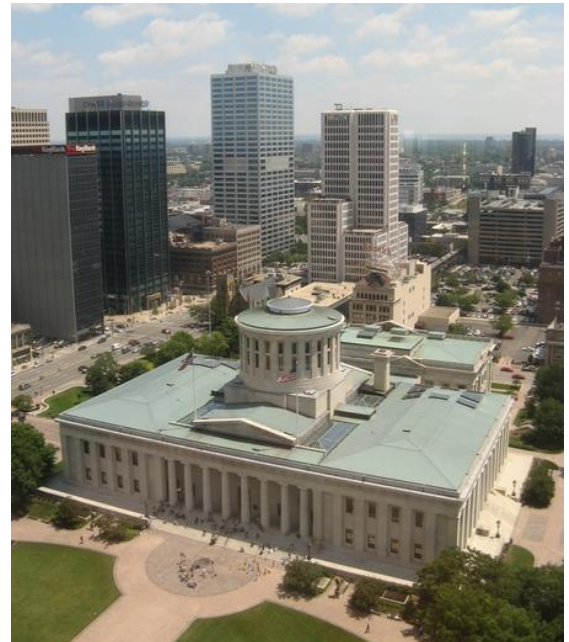


Photo courtesy of the Ohio Statehouse Photo Archive

Selecting a Strategic Delegation

Organizing a diverse, strategic group of constituents is the key to any successful meeting. A good delegation will increase the credibility of the group and showcase broad support for the issue.

The ideal group consists of four to six individuals that each represent different but compelling angles on the issue. For instance, if you want to persuade a legislator to require the labeling of genetically engineered foods, you may want to bring a group that has one or more farmers, a plant breeding scientist, a minister, a manufacturer, and a mother. When selecting group members, keep in mind what issues and voices are likely to be compelling to the legislator. For example, if your legislator runs a small business and serves on the Economic and Small Business Development committee, a small business owner in your group may be the most effective voice for addressing your legislator's concerns about the impact of labeling on business.

Once you've decided to schedule a meeting, contact Amalie Lipstreu at amalie@oeffa.org or (614) 421-2022 Ext. 208. OEFFA will work to have staff or a board member join you.

Preparing for Your Visit

You are the best advocate when you are well-informed about your legislator and the issues to be discussed. Prior to the meeting, gather as many facts as possible. Strive to have three kinds of information: (1) general statewide statistics and information, (2) information specific to the legislator's district, and (3) a compelling personal story, which one or more of your delegates can share.

Additionally, you need to make yourself familiar with the legislator's background, voting record, and his or her constituency. Find common ground with the legislator that you can use to build a relationship.

Finally, prepare an agenda with your delegation that outlines concise talking points, assigned roles for each person at the meeting, and a clear "ask"—what you're requesting the legislator do as a result of your meeting. Remember, OEFFA is here to help and can assist you in preparing for your meeting.

During the Meeting

At this point most of the hard work is done, you just need to stay focused and stick to the agenda. Be focused, respectful, and friendly – even if you disagree. Being adversarial will not get you far. Instead, present your issues clearly, concisely, and, most importantly, calmly.

Allow time for the legislator to respond and listen carefully to what he or she is saying. This will help you understand what about your argument resonates and what does not. This information will be helpful to you in future meetings and to determine what facts or partners you need, or obstacles you need to overcome, in order to move forward.

If you don't know the answer to a question, that's okay. Just tell the representative and their staff that you will find out the answer and follow up after the meeting. It is much better to wait and get the correct answer than to "wing it" and provide inaccurate information. Above all else, be credible and trustworthy.

After the Meeting

You did it! But, you're not quite done. Make sure to follow up with the legislator's office. A letter should thank the representative for their time, repeat your "ask," and provide any additional information that was asked for during the meeting.

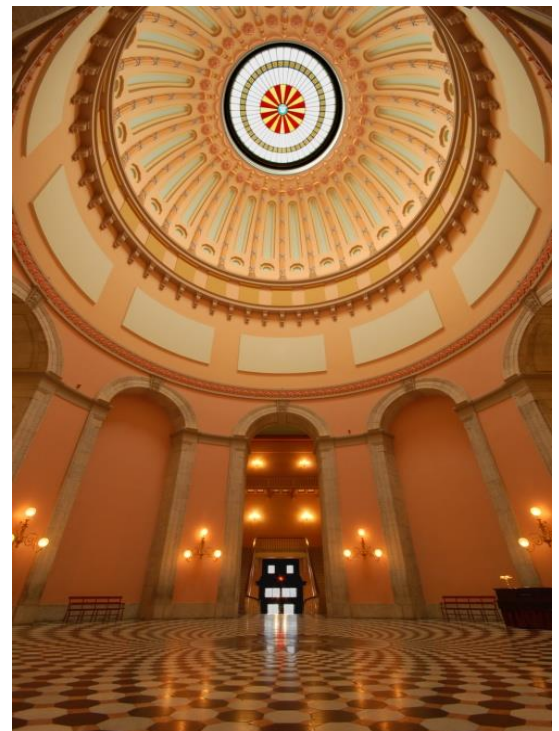


Photo courtesy of the Ohio Statehouse Photo Archive

For more information, or to discuss a meeting that you're planning, contact OEFFA's Policy Program Coordinator, Amalie Lipstreu at amalie@oeffa.org or (614) 421-2022 Ext. 208.

Additional Resources

<http://policy.oeffa.org/home>

www.ohiosenate.gov

www.house.state.oh.us

www.legislature.state.oh.us

www.thomas.gov

www.govtrack.us/congress/members/OH