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Advocacy 101

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the legislative process, which can be both complex and impersonal. Most people do not know who their elected representatives are and have not engaged in direct advocacy of any kind, let alone federal advocacy directed at their senators and representatives in Congress. However, as a constituent and a voter, your voice is important and powerful at all levels of government.

The first job of an elected official is to get elected, and starting their first day in office, they are always running for reelection. Subsequently, members of Congress are very responsive to individuals who live in their district and have the ability to vote either for or against them. While they may not always agree with a constituent, the opinion of the people they represent is very important for them to know. The voice of a constituent, and even better, an organized group of constituents, is very powerful.

Why engage in advocacy?

- Advocacy is not a one-time activity; ideally you want to establish yourself and your organization as a resource to members of Congress and their staff for timely and accurate information.
- It is about building a trusted relationship with elected officials, administrators, and their staff over time.
- Effective advocacy is rooted in mutual respect and trust. Even if you and a member disagree, you want them to trust your facts and your sources; ultimately this is the best foundation for educating and persuading policymakers.

What constitutes effective advocacy?

- Engaging with members of Congress and their staff allows you to influence the development and implementation of effective public policy.
- As a direct service provider or someone working in the field, you have community specific expertise to bear on policy decisions.
- Advocacy and storytelling encourage movement beyond a “one-size-fits-all” approach to developing policy solutions and help members take into account the unique needs in their own state and communities.
Virtual Meetings

As we feel the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in every aspect of our lives, a lot has changed about how we do our work. Local programs have had to make profound adjustments to service structures, and advocates have had to change many of their services and networking to virtual platforms. Many of us have now grown accustomed handling much of our work online. That holds true for members of Congress and their staff too. Your meetings may still need to be virtual this spring, and while members may have their preferences and rules about which platforms they prefer and can use, advocates and activists should feel empowered to move forward setting up virtual meetings with members and their staff. If you choose to prepare or meet in person, proper CDC guidelines about masks, social distancing, and quarantines following exposure should be followed.
Requesting your Meeting

To meet with your representative or senator during an in-district work period (when they are at home and not in D.C.), initiate your request through the scheduler in the district office where you would like to meet. You can find their website information at www.senate.gov or www.house.gov.

Each member’s website will list their office locations including their D.C. office and their district or state offices; these can typically be found at the bottom of their website or under “Contact” information. Most representatives and senators have two or more offices in the state or district; you can visit the location that is most convenient to you.

To identify the scheduler, call the district office and ask who you should direct your request to and how they prefer receiving meeting requests (email, fax, phone request, or online forms are all options used by congressional offices). We have provided you with a template email request which you can customize as appropriate.

Within three to five days of initiating your request, call the district scheduler to confirm that it was received; offices receive numerous requests and it is easy for an email to be overlooked. Following up is key to securing a meeting.

For member-level meetings, initiate your request as soon as possible; member’s days are often scheduled weeks in advance. Some offices may ask that you coordinate with their D.C.-based scheduler and will connect you with that office. Scheduling a meeting can be a bureaucratic process; allow sufficient time for the scheduler to process your request.

If the member is unavailable, the scheduler will likely connect you with a staffer who handles issues related to sexual violence; it is perfectly acceptable to meet with staff. If the scheduler does not offer an alternative contact and you do not know the staffer who handles these issues, you can call the district office and ask who they recommend. It is often easier to get on a staffer’s calendar and in most cases, they schedule their own meetings.
Preparing for your meeting

One of the most important things you can do to prepare for advocacy meetings is to know who you are meeting with and where that member of Congress stands on the issues important to you and your organization. The House and Senate websites can help you identify your member of Congress (House.gov) and senators (Senate.gov).

Another critical element in successful advocacy is to keep your message consistent with your organization’s policy priorities. In preparation for your in-district meetings, The National Alliance to End Sexual Violence (NAESV) has provided policy one-pagers and key talking points that offer guidance on how to talk about key policy issues. Get to know the priorities well before your advocacy meetings and practice the talking points.

Normal things to expect

Even if you are scheduled to meet with the member, you might end up meeting with staff instead because of unforeseen schedule changes. Similarly, you may end up meeting with a different staffer than expected.

A meeting with the member or a staffer could be very brief and last less than 15 minutes depending on their schedule, how familiar they are with your organization, and how aligned they are with your policies and your ask.

Staff that you meet with may be young. That does not mean they aren’t knowledgeable or that they are the wrong person to be meeting with.
Conducting Your Meeting

Be on time. Dress appropriately; usually that means business or business casual attire even if the meeting is virtual. For online meetings, give thought to a neutral background and quiet space. Be sure everyone in your group is introduced and knows which issues they will cover in the meeting. Always start on a positive note. Find something to thank the office for.

✔️ Know your audience. What committees does the member serve on? If you are meeting with a staffer, what is their policy portfolio (i.e. what issues do they cover for their boss)? Check recent news coverage of the member and read up on their website.

✔️ Once you know who is participating in your meeting, determine each participant’s role including who will speak about which issue and when.

✔️ Identify in advance who is taking notes including the tenor of the meeting, any questions asked by the member or their staff, and any meeting follow-up.

✔️ In addition to rape crisis center leadership and staff, consider inviting a survivor activist, a well-connected board member, and/or a community leader who has benefited from your prevention programs to join you to further reflect your important work.

✔️ Designate a team lead who can introduce the group and frame the purpose of your meeting.

✔️ Be aware of high-profile cases or other issues in the news and how, if at all, you want to address or respond to those.

✔️ Prepare your talking points and your “ask.”
It is very common to meet with a member’s staff and not with the member directly. Staff exercise significant influence on how a member will vote and are often responsible for understanding the details; do not view a meeting with a staff person as a waste of time. Often these are the people who inform their bosses’ decisions and votes.

If you are asked a question you do not know the answer to, it is okay to tell the staffer you do not know. DO NOT make something up, guess, or hedge. This opening actually provides an opportunity for you to follow up with the office. Remember that advocacy is about a relationship. You want the official and staff to trust you and see you as a credible resource. If you give incorrect information, you will severely undermine your credibility; instead, offer to try to find the information as part of your meeting follow-up.
Conducting Your Meeting

**Do**

- Be concise with key points ready and plan on meeting for no more than 25 minutes; most members and their staff are scheduled every half hour.

- Leave time for the official to respond and to ask you questions.

- Know the bill number and name if you are talking about specific legislation. Do not expect that the member or their staff will necessarily be familiar with the legislation.

- Speak from your area of expertise and share personal stories. Storytelling puts real-life faces with facts and data.

- Find out where the official stands on the issue.

- Ask specific questions and try to get specific commitments.

- Be sure to mention if you are a constituent.

- Be passionate, but make sure to stay calm and in control of your words, body language, and emotions.

- Make sure to include specific “asks” unless you’re having a meeting to simply educate the member.

**Don’t**

- Do most of the talking! This is a conversation; leave time and space for other participants and the member or their staff to engage.

- Issue explicit or veiled threats or bring “politics” into the meeting.

- Guess the answer to a question. Misleading an official is far worse than seeming uniformed. If you do not have an answer, let them know how and when you will follow up with the information they have asked for.

- Leave without making your ask and getting clarity on next steps.
Concluding Your Meeting

Finally, end on a positive note. Even if you have not found anything you agree on, you can agree to keep talking. Never threaten to defeat the official in their next election. It will destroy your relationship with the official, and you can almost never deliver on that threat. Again, if nothing else, thank them for their time. You never know when the issue will be re-framed and find that all of a sudden the two of you agree again. Voila, politics.

- Ask if there are any questions.
- End on a positive note and express thanks, even if the meeting was not ideal.
- If you have been asked a question you did not know the answer to, reiterate that you will follow-up with an answer.
- For online meetings, consider pasting links to resources and supporting materials in the chat or sending them in a follow up email.
- Remind the official that you want to act as a resource.
- Invite the member or their staff to attend an upcoming event or to tour your program.
Talking Points

Setting the stage

- If multiple people are participating in the meeting, designate a meeting “captain” who will facilitate the flow of conversation and a note-taker who will record any questions asked by a member (or their staff) and any required follow-up.
- Each participant should introduce themselves including name; the name and location of their program or role; and a brief description.
- Thank the person with whom you are meeting for the appointment and the congressperson’s work [include a tailored thank-you based on the member’s record on issues related to sexual violence if possible].

Framing the conversation

- Email the representative, senator, or staff member any supporting materials in advance.
- Your story is the most important message you can share with a member of Congress. Personalize the issue by talking about the needs in your state or district and the people you serve.
- By sharing the needs in your community and the difficulties you face meeting those needs, you paint a picture of the critical need for funding that relates directly to the member’s constituents.

The need: Talk about the impact of federal funding in your community

- Programs aimed at preventing and responding to sexual violence such as the Sexual Assault Services Program (SASP), the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), and the Rape Prevention & Education (RPE) program have been extremely successful in our community and across the nation.
- However, many victims still have unmet needs, and we must continue to improve our responses to address and prevent the crisis of violence in many communities.
- The demand for safety and services increases with high-profile cases, national commentary (such as the #MeToo movement), better outreach, improved response, and increased awareness.
- According to a 2021 survey by NAESV, 76% of programs experienced an increased demand for services last year. Current funding in most states cannot meet existing demand, let alone the increase in demand rape crisis centers across the country are experiencing.
- Sexual assault services and prevention are critically underfunded, creat-
In the past few years, demand for prevention has skyrocketed, the evidence base has progressed significantly, funding is insufficient, and further investment in the RPE program is desperately needed. According to a 2021 survey by the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, at current funding levels, nearly 1/3 of programs have a waiting list for services, 67% of those are for counseling services, and 45% of programs lack a full time therapist on staff.

Services & prevention: How we achieve change

- Federal funding plays an important role in helping fill the gap and meet local needs. According to the Office on Violence Against Women Report to Congress for the most recent two-year reporting period, 55,000 survivors were served with funding from the SASP.
- VOCA, a non-taxpayer fund, supports over four million victims across the nation each year.
- Tailor talking points to your specific program and the needs of your community and your program. (Example: survivors served, waiting list, increased demand).
- How many survivors do you serve?
- Do you have a waiting list and if so, how long is it?
- Have you experienced an increase in the number of people requesting services; and if so, what does that increase look like?
- What portions of your state have access to prevention? Are you able to meet the demand for prevention? What prevention successes are you seeing?

The Specific Ask

Is Representative/Senator__ __ __ willing to support:

- SASP: $100 million for the Sexual Assault Services program at the Office on Violence Against Women.
- RPE: $101.75 Rape Prevention & Education Program at the CDC to $101.75 million.
- VOCA: Release steady funding ($2.65 billion) from the CVF that reflects deposits and fund levels
- Local ask: For example, visit our program or attend our signature event.
Concluding the meeting

- Ask if the member/staffer has any additional questions.
- Make sure you have names and emails for all staff in attendance. Invite the member/staffer to visit and tour your program and/or to speak at an upcoming event during Sexual Assault Awareness Month or the August recess.
- Ask if the member/staffer would like any follow-up information.
- If you met with a member, send a handwritten thank you note as follow-up; an email is fine for staff.

Social Media

- Be sure to share your visit on social media!
- You can use Twitter to thank your member or post a photo to Facebook (with their permission). For example: Thank you @SenatorABC for meeting with (insert program name) to talk about critical funding for survivors of sexual assault #SupportSurvivors.

Don’t know your member’s twitter handle? You can visit this link to look it up.
Dear [scheduler’s name],

My name is [name] and I am a constituent of Representative/Senator [name]; I am contacting you to request a meeting with the member during the April in-district work period on behalf of the [insert organization/state coalition].

My colleagues and I are interested in setting up a virtual/in person meeting with the member about the importance of funding rape crisis centers, supportive services for survivors of rape and sexual assault, and rape prevention in our community. These services have historically been underfunded, resulting in waiting lists, including [number] centers in [state]. The prominence of public conversations about sexual harassment, assault, and rape have resulted in an increased demand for services and prevention programs that most centers are unable to meet, forcing them to either turn away survivors in need or try to stretch their already limited funding even further.

The federal government plays a critical role in supporting rape crisis centers through programs including the Violence Against Women Act, Victims of Crime Act, Sexual Assault Services Program, and the Rape Prevention & Education program. As direct service providers, we are eager to meet with Representative/Senator [name] and share what we are seeing in the community and the consequence of failing to fund these necessary and life-saving services.

I can be reached at [number] or [email] to schedule a meeting; I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,
[Your Name]
Dear Representative/Senator [name],

Thank you for taking the time to meet with members of the [state coalition/program] on [date] to discuss the importance of funding rape crisis centers in [state] and across the country.

Federal funding plays a vital role in ensuring that rape crisis centers in [state] can meet the needs of your constituents for sexual assault services and prevention programs. While the national conversation about rape and assault has opened many people’s eyes to both the prevalence of assault and its impact on survivors, it has also drawn attention to the growing gap between the demand for, and availability of, services and prevention programs in our state.

By fully funding programs including VAWA, VOCA, SASP, and RPE, you help to ensure that no survivor is turned away. You also make [community name] safer for us all.

As we discussed during our meeting...[summarize any commitment made by the member; answer any question asked during the meeting that you did not have an answer for at the time; and/or reference any materials you offered to send as follow-up].

Lastly, we would like to invite you to visit a rape crisis center during your August recess. We would be happy to help schedule and facilitate a tour so that you and your staff can see first-hand the importance of the services you make possible through federal funding.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to continuing to work with you and your office to ensure we are meeting the needs of the residents of [state/district].

Best,
[Your Name]
Legislative Advocacy Timeline 2022

- March 24th: Participate in prep webinar with NAESV
- March 28th: Request meetings
- Week of April 4th: Gather materials, hold prep meeting for attendees, practice talking points
- Week of April 11 – April 22: Hold meetings
- Week of April 25th: Thank you notes, follow up with any information requested at meetings, and send an invitation for August recess tour or event
- August: Recess Tour/event with members of congress
NAESV District Advocacy
Visit Report

Date of visit: 

Your name: 

Program/Coalition name: 

Your email address: 

Name of Representative or Senator: 

Who did you meet with at this meeting? 

Email of the highest ranking staff member at the meeting: 

Issues discussed: 

Questions asked: 

Tone of the meeting: 

**RESOURCE TIP:**
Save time by submitting this report online! Use the following link to access the form:
## Congressional Calendar

### Key
- **Dark Grey**: Both chambers in session
- **Light Blue**: Senate
- **Orange**: House

### Important Phone Numbers:
- **White House Switchboard**: (202) 456-1414
- **U.S. Capitol Switchboard**: (202) 244-3121
- **Senate Republican Cloakroom**: (202) 224-6191
- **Senate Democratic Cloakroom**: (202) 225-4691
- **House Republican Cloakroom**: (202) 225-7350
- **House Democratic Cloakroom**: (202) 225-7330

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Rape crisis centers across the country are experiencing severe funding issues.

57% of rape crisis centers responding to the survey experienced an overall decrease in funding during this fiscal year (Almost 2/3).

50% experienced a reduction in staffing (layoffs, positions not filled, positions eliminated).

76% of programs report an increased demand for services this past year.

When rape crisis centers are underfunded, they can’t meet the needs of sexual assault survivors and prevention programs are sidelined.

45% of programs do not have a mental health counselor or therapist on staff.

65% of programs report that their center’s average salary for staff is < $40,000.

Most underserved populations:

50% of programs report that survivors of color are underserved in their community.

54% of programs report that survivors who are homeless are underserved in their community.

“The connections you have helped me create has truly saved my life”

~NH survivor

“This program provided the support and help I needed in my darkest moment. My life was truly changed.”

~Colorado survivor

“We never went away. Throughout this pandemic, our advocates are essential workers, providing in-person advocacy at hospitals and law enforcement 24/7.”

~IA advocate

It’s time to increase funding for rape crisis centers.

Based on a National Alliance to End Sexual Violence 2021 online survey of rape crisis centers.
Contact:
info@endsexualviolence.org
endsexualviolence.org