

## Your Congressional Visit

You have a very important issue you want to discuss with your elected officials. You requested and, to your surprise, were able to get a meeting with one of your senators, Senator Shockley, while he is in your area during a congressional recess. How do you get ready for the meeting? What are some things to keep in mind during your session with the senator? The following suggestions are provided to make your meeting productive and positive. These suggestions apply to meetings with elected officials and with members of their staffs.

**Do your homework.** If you are going to approach a US senator with a request that he or she supports or opposes legislation on your behalf, you need to ensure that you have the facts straight. If you don't "have your ducks in a row," you can look foolish, won't be taken seriously, and likely won't ever get another session with that elected official. So, take a critical look at the current situation. Examine legislation that is on the table and legislation that may have been introduced in the past. If you are bringing a situation to the senator's attention that is not currently supported by legislation, make sure you know the background, reasons, and details of the situation. It is important that you grasp the facts because the facts are what will win the day for you. Opinion unsupported by fact is of little interest to decision makers. So, arm yourself with a good understanding of the background and the current details of the issue you want to discuss with the senator.

**Prepare fact sheets.** Prepare concise fact sheets that support your position to leave with the senator. Prepare the facts in a logical sequence that supports the argument you intend to make. Clearly state what you want the senator to do, and explain why. Include your name and contact information on the fact sheet in case the senator wants to get back to you. If you know the bill numbers of legislation already introduced, include them on your fact sheet. If a bill has not already been introduced, clearly suggest what programs, regulations, or laws need to be adjusted. Include factual information critical to the argument you intend to make.

**Learn about the official you are meeting.** Before your meeting, in addition to learning about the issue, take the time to study the background of the senator. If, for example, you learn the senator supported positive legislation in the past, you will be able to mention it near the beginning of the meeting and thank him for his support. It will start your meeting with complimentary recognition of the senator's past action. It is a good technique, it also shows that you have done some homework, and it just might enhance your chances of getting the senator to support you again.

**Be on time for your appointment.** Arrive a few minutes early and identify yourself to the receptionist. Being on time is very, very important since the appointments of elected officials are generally scheduled very close together. If you are late, don't expect to get in to see the senator.

**Plan to get to the point.** Think through how you are going to provide information and make your request as succinctly as possible. Practice stating your positions and presenting the facts in a concise, positive way. Your senator has limited time, and your brevity will show an appreciation of the senator's busy schedule. Again, such signals of respect will enhance your chances of winning the day.

**Plan to be professional.** It is very important that you use tact and professionalism when communicating with your senator. Anger or undue emotion will generally stop the communicative process. It may make you feel better, but it will almost certainly suggest to the senator that you are out of control, and it usually will kill your effort to achieve your end. Similarly, getting emotional, making threats, or being nasty is nonproductive. If you want results, state the facts, provide justification and rationale for your position, and deliver your request in a positive way. Clear, respectful presentation of facts and reasoned debate are the methods of true professionals. Three rules to follow when presenting your point of view: Tell the truth, don't guess, and don't exaggerate. Another important thing to remember: If you identify yourself as a member of AFSA, what you say and how you act will reflect on the entire organization. So, remember to stay positive and professional.

Keeping all of this in mind, the following fictional script is provided to show some of the give and take that normally takes place during a congressional meeting. When you arrive in the office or meeting place, let the receptionist know that you are there for your scheduled meeting with the senator. In most cases, the elected official will come out and greet you and escort into the office or meeting place. Senator Shockley has just done so, and you are now sitting in the senator's office.

- **Senator Smith:** Sergeant Jones, I'm glad you stopped by. What can I do for you?
- **You:** Good morning, Senator. I appreciate your taking the time to meet with me. You've supported us in the past, especially on the issues of protecting retiree cost-of-living adjustments and reforming the Montgomery G.I. Bill. Military service members know about that and appreciate your concern for their well-being. Although I'm coming to you

as an individual, the issue I need your help with impacts many career enlisted members. Specifically, I need you to vote to stop the Department of Defense's effort to significantly increase the cost of the military health care benefit for retirees. Frankly, there are numerous ways DoD can save money by implementing reforms within its system—without increasing the costs of earned benefits.

- **Senator Smith:** Sergeant Jones, I am aware of that issue, but the Department has indicated it no longer has the funding to support the program, and it tells me that the changes it is advocating are relatively minor increases.
- **You:** Senator Smith, I can illustrate that those claims are based on incorrect information. Here is a fact sheet that I'll leave with you that gives you what I consider to be the facts. First, the budgetary shortfall was created by DoD itself; it requested a far smaller funding amount for health care than last year. It got what it requested, but now is claiming that it is short of funds to support the programs. Therefore, it maintains that it must raise benefit costs for retirees. The fact sheet shows last year's funding levels and DoD's request for this year. I believe the facts show that DoD clearly created its own budgetary shortfall.
- **Senator Smith:** Let me look at this for a minute. (Pause) Alright, I will have my staff check these figures. Anything else?
- **You:** Yes sir. The fact sheet also shows how harmful the DoD plan would be. It lists the specific details of the DoD proposal. It would double the cost for enlisted retirees and triple it for officers. It would establish an annual "user fee" for TRICARE Standard without any improvements to the program or any guarantee of improved access. It would increase the annual deductibles, and it would significantly increase the cost of prescriptions. Most significant, it would then tie annual increases in the cost of the military benefit to increases in the cost of FEHBP, the federal health care plan—which increases at 8 to 10 percent per year. That would hurt retirees and, over time, significantly reduce the "benefit." That means that the military health care benefit which was a promised, free lifetime benefit will cost those who served full military careers more and more. I also list on the fact sheet the reasons that I ask you to stop the legislation, and the ways that DoD can internally save a great deal of budgetary cost by implementing smart in-house practices. I believe that DoD's proposed change is not justified, and it is clearly not in the best interest of military members.

- **Senator Smith:** It looks like you did your homework. That's quite a bit of information in a short period of time. And you've given me a lot to look at. I will have my legislative assistant, Paul Brown, get a little more information from you, and I'll have him get back to you.
- **You:** I appreciate it, Senator.
- **Senator Smith:** I appreciate your stopping by and your service to our country. We will get back to you.
- **You:** Thanks again, Senator, for making the time to see me and considering my request.
- **Senator Smith:** Okay, take care of yourself. Paul, take a look at Sergeant Jones' fact sheet and get DoD on the phone so we can clarify the conflicting information we've been given. Thanks again, Sergeant Jones.

End of meeting.

\* \* \* \* \* Remember, do your homework, prepare your fact sheets, plan your presentation, and participate in your meetings with elected officials in a positive, professional manner.

Good luck!