

Tips for Reaching Out to State and Local Officials

State and local officials are an important audience for your work—just as important as members of Congress. You can apply many of the same principles you used with members of your congressional delegation in order to prepare for a successful meeting with your state and local policymakers. Still, there are some important differences worth considering as you develop your strategy for engaging them in your work.



SO, HOW DO YOU APPLY WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT MEETING WITH FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS?

REMEMBER THE ANATOMY OF A MEETING.

Follow the basic tenets previously outlined in the Anatomy of a Meeting: Start with a compelling introduction and humanize your work with a personal story. Then present them with your strategic ask and be sure to follow up to continue to build the relationship. This is a simple strategy for success that works at all levels of government.

CUT THROUGH THE CLUTTER

State and local policymakers, like federal officials, are busy people who get bombarded with information every day. Tailor your one-pager to localize the issue so that it's relevant to the work of the state or local official with whom you're meeting.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Find out all you can about your state and local officials. Although information may not be as plentiful as for their national counterparts, it's still available. Start with the Internet; explore the website for your state legislature, which may provide links to individual policymakers' pages. Visit the websites for possible national associations your officials might belong to, such as the National Conference of State Legislatures (www.ncsl.org), the National Governors Association (www.nga.org), or the U.S. Conference of Mayors (www.usmayors.org). Follow the news to get a sense of how each official is being covered. Attend town halls and other events where they may be speaking. Most important, tap your friends and colleagues for information—they are often the best resources.

LOOK FOR THE LINKS TO YOUR WORK

As you research your policymakers and their backgrounds, look for common interests or shared affiliations. For instance, many state and local officials have other full-time jobs. How might that experience influence their interest in your particular issue? Does it present opportunities for you to engage them in support of your work?

LOOK FOR LINKS TO OTHER INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE

Sometimes, marching straight to your local policymaker to deliver your message may not be the best strategy. Perhaps another, more closely-linked, partner could carry the message for you, or at least facilitate a credible introduction. Explore the relationships you have with your board, businesses, the faith community, or other people who may be closely linked with the official you want to reach.

BE FAMILIAR WITH RESTRICTIONS.

Each of your organizations may have different restrictions on what you are allowed to do or ask when working with officials at the state and local levels, in addition to the rules on what you can do or ask for when you are using grant funds from RWJF. Be sure to familiarize yourself with any such restrictions prior to engaging these officials.

THINK LONG TERM.

Think of the relationship-building process as a long-term investment. What are some simple steps to get an official engaged in your work in the short term that will benefit you down the road? Be patient; some benefits may appear immediately, but others may take some time to materialize.

BE AWARE OF THESE DIFFERENCES WHEN WORKING AT THE STATE OR LOCAL LEVEL:

ALL STATES ARE DIFFERENT.

Unlike Congress, where similar rules apply to all, each state is unique in terms of the rules, processes and procedures that govern its policymaking. Start with your state legislature's website to gather basic information about how your state operates. You can also check the website for the National Conference of State Legislatures (www.ncsl.org) for legislative news and updates, policy forecasts and information on state versus federal policy.

TIME MAY BE SHORT.

Most state legislatures are not in session year-round; some may meet for only a few months to begin the year, others may meet only every other year. Refer to your legislature's website for specific information about your state's session schedule.

THINGS HAPPEN FASTER.

At the state and local level, the policy process often moves much more rapidly than at the federal level, where debates can go on for years without any significant movement.

STAFF MAY BE LIMITED.

State legislators and local elected officials will generally not have as much staff support as a congressional office. This may mean more face time with the elected official; it may also mean working with one staff person whose responsibilities run the full gamut of issues under the policymaker's purview.

