



Oncology Nursing Society

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TOP TEN TIPS FOR CONGRESSIONAL MEETINGS

Meeting with Members of Congress and/or their staff is a terrific way for oncology nurses to communicate with policymakers on issues of interest and priority. Visiting with them enables you to educate them about your concerns, avail yourself to them as a resource, and establish a relationship that can prove mutually beneficial over time. It is best to build a relationship before your need it. Such meetings can be conducted at Congressional offices in Washington, DC, or at home in district offices and, if done correctly, can result in garnering support for the Oncology Nursing Society's (ONS's) public policy priorities.

Prior to arriving in Washington, DC, or at the district office, be sure to schedule a meeting with a staffer or through the appointment secretary or scheduler for a visit with the Member of Congress. Be clear who will be attending and what issue(s) will be discussed. The day before, confirm the appointment as the Congressional schedule changes very often. Such changes frequently are beyond their control.

- 1. Prepare and be on time.** Members of Congress and their staff are very busy and often have to be in more than one place at a time. Be respectful of their schedule by giving yourself plenty of time to go through security, find your way to the office, and announce yourself to the receptionist. If you will be attending in a group, discuss with your colleagues in advance what you will be covering in the meeting. Be sure to select a primary spokesperson and determine who in the group will be raising which points and requests. Open by thanking the Member or staffer for his or her time. Be sure that everyone in the group identifies herself or himself – first and last name and connection to oncology nursing and cancer – and remember to mention that you are a voting constituent. Also provide some context about where you live or work in the district or state. If the Member or staffer has been helpful in the past or has taken action that you appreciate, be sure to say thank you and acknowledge that up front. Prior to your meeting with the Member or staffer, it is best to get a sense of what matters currently are pending before Congress and the committee(s) on which the Member sits. For recommended resources for this type of information, visit <http://thomas.loc.gov> or check out the ONS Health Policy Tool Kit Resources <http://www.ons.org/lac/hptk/index.shtml>.

ONCOLOGY NURSING SOCIETY TOP TEN TIPS FOR CONGRESSIONAL MEETINGS

2. **Be brief and clear** because you typically will have only 10–25 minutes for the entire meeting. Cover only a few (one to three) topics. It is best to prepare talking points beforehand to ensure that you and your colleagues stay on target. Anticipate the kinds of questions you may be asked from both supporters and opponents. Do your best to be prepared to answer such questions in the meeting; if asked a question to which you do not know the answer, acknowledge that the question is a good one and indicate that because you are not certain of the answer, you will need to follow up later (and remember to do so). Do not assume that the Member or staffer is very knowledgeable about the issue you are discussing. Be sure to provide some background. If you are not discussing a specific piece of legislation, explain that you want to provide background information or provide your perspective on an issue of importance to you and your community.
3. **Be sure to provide a personal story or real-life illustration** of the problem. Personal stories are remembered more easily than statistics. As necessary, briefly cite evidence or statistics to support your position, particularly any local, regional, or state data. However, be sure not to overwhelm the policymaker or staffer with too many statistics and references to studies (this kind of information can be in the materials you leave behind or can be sent with your thank-you note). Discuss how the policy change (e.g., increased funding for the Nurse Reinvestment Act, boosting Medicare reimbursement for outpatient cancer care) will have an impact on your community. Be concise and honest about the issue(s) and the solution(s), and make clear the relevance of the issue(s) to constituents.
4. **Be polite and listen carefully** to the policymakers' or staffers' views and comments. Even if you disagree, it is very important to be courteous. Be flexible and consider the opposing view. Be sure not to be argumentative or threatening. You may agree to disagree on an issue today and find that you can agree and work together on another matter tomorrow. Much of health policy advocacy is about building and maintaining relationships over time. Some of the best friends of the cancer community were not always allies, but because of a combination of advocates' tenacity and a history of being respectful, providing reliable information, and making a compelling case, we have won over some terrific champions.
5. **Be sure to get a response in a nice way.** Ask directly and politely for the policymaker's views and position on the issue and what he or she plans to do. Do not let the policymaker or staffer distract you with other issues (gently steer the conversation back to your issue), avoid responding, or dismiss your specific concerns with a broad statement such as "I am working against cancer by supporting more funding for biomedical research." Be sure to stay on message and the topic as politely as possible. It is your Constitutional right to "petition Congress for redress of grievances," so take this opportunity to do what you can to get a commitment from the Member to take action on your request(s). However, if the Member truly is undecided or the staffer is not familiar with the Member's position on the issue, do not force the issue. Reiterate your interest in knowing, offer to answer any additional questions or provide information, and request a written follow-up letter from the Member once a decision has been made about your pending request.

ONCOLOGY NURSING SOCIETY TOP TEN TIPS FOR CONGRESSIONAL MEETINGS

6. **Bring a brief number of materials with you to leave behind.** However, do not give the materials until the close of the meeting or the Member or staffer may choose to start reading the material and only listen to you with one ear. Early on in the meeting indicate that you have materials to leave on the topic(s). Be sure to follow up and follow through on any promises of additional information.
7. **Leave your contact information.** If you leave a business card, make it clear that you are visiting on your own time and not representing your employer unless you have received such clearance. Be sure to get a business card from the Member or staffer so that you know how and where to reach him or her. Ask the Member or staffer for the preferred mode of communication (i.e., e-mail, fax, voice mail, phone).
8. **Summarize your requests of the Member or office** and any responses the Member or staffer has given to ensure you are clear on where he or she stands on the issues. Summarize the Member or staffer's requests and indicate how you plan to respond. Express thanks and appreciation for his or her time, interest, and courtesy.
9. **Report back to ONS** and any other advocacy partners involved in the issue or effort so that others can follow up with the office with any additional information and reinforce the message(s) you delivered. For support of your advocacy efforts or to report back from a meeting, please e-mail government.relations@ons.org or call ONS Executive Director Bridget Culhane (866-237-4ONS, ext. 6384) or ONS Health Policy Associates at Gardner, Carton, and Douglas in Washington, DC, Ilisa Paul (202-230-5145) or Christine Williams (202-230-5159).
10. **Follow up with a thank-you note** to the Member or staffer referencing the date of your meeting, who was in attendance, and the issues you discussed. Your follow-up letter should express appreciation for the time and consideration extended to you during your meeting, reiterate your request(s), and ask for a written response from the office. Be sure to call, e-mail, or write with answers or information the Member or staffer requested. Keep in touch with the Member or staffer to maintain and strengthen the relationship, and make yourself available as a local resource on nursing and cancer issues. There are times when you and an elected official will have to agree to disagree, but over time, you also may find that the policymaker may be supportive and helpful on other matters. Great ways to keep in touch include sending an article of interest from a local newspaper, e-mailing a copy of the latest *ONS News* or other publication, or inviting the Member or staffer to attend an ONS chapter meeting when he or she is visiting at home. *If your initial meeting is in Washington, DC, be sure to schedule a similar meeting with the staff in the district or state office and check in with your policymaker when he or she is at home visiting to reinforce the relationship and follow up on your issues of priority.*

ONCOLOGY NURSING SOCIETY TOP TEN TIPS FOR CONGRESSIONAL MEETINGS

Other Tips

When visiting Capitol Hill, you may encounter long lines to get through security. Bags and all contents from your pockets must be put through x-ray machines, and you must step through a metal detector. Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time to get through security.

The Congressional schedule is very fluid and Members and staffers often are pulled away for various events and activities that are not known in advance (e.g., last-minute press conference, a meeting with the chair of a committee on which the Member sits); as a result, your meeting could be delayed or bumped (the Member may not be available and instead you may meet with staff). Also, space at Capitol Hill is at a premium, so your meeting could occur in the reception area in the office, in the hallway, or downstairs in the coffee shop. Do not take any last-minute meeting changes personally and make sure you always are gracious and flexible.

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