

Legislator Visits Made Easy

1 Who's Your Legislator?

If this is your first time meeting with your legislator, you can find their contact information using the **Who's My Legislator tool**.

2 Scheduling a Meeting

If you are able to do so, **try to schedule a meeting with your legislator outside of the yearly General Assembly session**, which takes place in January/February. This gives you the opportunity to build a relationship with your legislator when they have more time available.

- When calling the legislator's office, **ask to speak with the appointment scheduler**. Be prepared to be flexible on the dates and times you can meet; have several options ready.
- Be prepared to **provide the scheduler with the number of people who will attend and a short summary of the purpose of the meeting**. It is best if those attending are constituents. You may be asked to fax or email a formal written request indicating the same information plus the names of those who will be attending the meeting.
- **The typical meeting is scheduled for 15-30 minutes**, but during the General Assembly session, meeting times may be much shorter. It is not unusual for legislative schedules to change unexpectedly, so be prepared to be as flexible as possible.
- If the legislator is not available at appointment time, take advantage of the opportunity to become acquainted with or to solidify your relationship with the legislator's staff. **Legislative aides are often the gatekeepers to legislators and can be invaluable in moving your agenda forward.**

Meeting with your legislators, either during the General Assembly session in Richmond or in their home office before the session begins, is one of the most important and effective ways to influence the policy process.

Members are more likely to support positions that their constituents feel strongly about, and there is no better way to display your passion for an issue than by taking the time to have a face-to-face meeting. Remember, your legislators are probably not nurses, so you can serve as their "subject matter expert" when it comes to the legislative needs of the nursing profession.

3 Meeting Preparation

Identify your main message. If you are speaking to your legislators to advance our policy agenda, please become familiar with Nursing's Public Policy Platform and other VNA talking points.

- **Before the meeting, determine the main message you want to convey to your legislator.** What is it you are asking them to do: support a bill, become more informed on an issue, etc.? Make your "ask" clear and concise. When speaking with legislators about our policy agenda, please refer to VNA-provided talking points.
- **Determine roles for participants:** (if more than one person is meeting with the legislator)
 - Designate a group leader to open and close the meeting, to deliver any leave-behind materials, and to keep the discussion moving.
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 - Prepare and practice for the meeting. It's always a good idea to run-through what you intend to say before the meeting itself.

4 During the Meeting

Dress nicely. If you wish to wear a nursing lab coat or scrubs, be sure you can be easily identified as a nurse rather than a physician or other professional. Employer ID badges work.

- **Introduce yourself.** Tell your legislator or staff person your name, where you are from, and that you are a constituent. If you represent an organization, note its name, location, and the size of its membership. If you are associated with a specific institution, identify it and your field of study (i.e. ecology). If you have any family, social, business, or political ties to the legislator, mention them as well. If you are attending a VNA-arranged meeting, a nurse ambassador or VNA staff member will be present to can conduct introductions.
- **Start with a compliment.** If possible, thank the member for a good stand he or she recently took on an issue and/or mention if you voted for the member. If the legislator sponsors or is voting in favor of legislation that helps the nursing profession, start by mentioning this.
- **Take the initiative.** State clearly and concisely what issue you want to discuss, what your position is, and what action you want the member to take. Follow this with facts about why he or she should take your position.
- **Make a local connection.** Stress how the issue will affect the legislator's district or state and, if possible, tell a personal story that highlights your experience with the issue and why you care about it.
- **Bring a "leave-behind" document.** Give the legislator a brief fact sheet (one to two pages) that outlines your position and explains what the bill does (if there is one) and why he or she should support your viewpoint.
- **Drop names.** Mention any other organizations, important individuals, government officials, and legislators that support your position.
- **Be a good listener.** After you make your pitch, allow the legislator to respond. Bring the conversation back to the issue at hand if he or she goes off on a tangent or tries to evade your position.
- **Don't answer what you don't know.** It's okay to not know all the answers. Answer questions to the best of your ability, and if you don't know an answer, admit it. This ensures you maintain credibility and it provides an opportunity for a relevant follow-up letter to provide any additional information.
- **Ask a direct question.** Ask a question to which the legislator can respond "yes" or "no." For example, "Can we count on you to cosponsor the bill?" Press politely for a commitment, unless the member is clearly opposed to your position or to making a commitment.
- **Thank the legislator.** Always thank the legislator for his or her time at the end of the meeting, even if he or she did not agree with your position.

5 After the Meeting

Write down your impressions. Immediately after the meeting write down any information you learned about the legislator's position.

- **Follow up.** Always follow up with a prompt thank you letter. In the letter, reiterate your key points and any commitments the legislator made to you. Include all follow-up information you promised to provide.
- **Let us know how it went.** Be sure to let VNA know the results of your meeting if you are speaking about nursing issues and our policy platform. If you are attending a Lobby Day, please give a VNA staff member your feedback.

6 Know Before You Go

No participant should talk more than five minutes at a time. Find a local angle. How does the issue affect the legislator's district or state?

- **Learn about your legislator in advance:**
 - What kind of constituency does the legislator have—rural, urban, suburban? What are the principal influences there—labor, business, farmers?
 - What were the winning margins in his or her previous elections? If they were narrow, the legislator knows he or she is vulnerable.
 - What is his or her background: upbringing, education, wealth, and other relevant previous experience?
 - What sort of ties does the legislator have to state or local organizations?
 - Where do the legislator's campaign contributions come from?
 - Who or what influences this legislator the most?"
- **Be confident, but do not lecture.** There's no one "right" way to talk with an elected official. Use these guidelines, but trust your instincts, be flexible and have fun.
- Members of the legislature are very busy and could be called out of the meeting—or not available at all—leaving you with their legislative aide that handles the issue. Don't let this discourage you. **Meeting with a staff member can be equally or even more productive than meeting with the member as staff have tremendous influence over legislators** Be sure to ask the staff person to convey your views and legislative requests to their boss.