

## ADVOCATING FOR CHANGE

---

# Meet with your legislators

*Tips for advocates from the Treatment Advocacy Center  
([www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org](http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org))*

Meeting with your legislator is the most effective way to explain the importance of treatment law reform. These visits allow you to personally "read" your representative's reaction to your request of support.

### BEFORE THE MEETING

**Identify who your legislators are.** One easy way to do this is through [www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org) or [www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org). These websites allow you to enter your ZIP code and get the names of your legislators. If you don't have internet access, call your library to get the name of your legislator.

**Learn about your legislator.** This important step can help refine your message. What issues does he or she feel strongest about? To what party does he or she belong? What organizations is he or she a member of? You can find out about your representative at Project Vote Smart ([www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org) or 1-888-VOTE-SMART).

**Gather materials and a plan.** Pull together a packet of materials to leave behind. You might want to include opinion pieces, news articles, fact sheets, or personal stories. You can print some appropriate pieces from the TAC web site. If you have a personal story to share, consider bringing photographs of your loved one who was affected by not receiving timely treatment.

**Plan your presentation.** If you plan to visit in a team with another person(s), decide who will say what before meeting with your representative so you don't repeat each other. For example, one person could present the objective need for reform and the other his or her personal story. A very effective team effort is when a family member, consumer, and provider or psychiatrist visit together.

**Know the facts.** Make sure you know the key facts of the proposed legislation and why you want your legislator to support it.

**Schedule an appointment.** Call your legislator's office to schedule an appointment. Give your name and reason for visiting. If the staffer asks you how much time you need with your representative, request 30 minutes. Remember: you are competing for each legislator's time, so being considerate is key. In some cases, a member of your representative's legislative staff will tell you how much time you may have. Always take what you can get, but be prepared to be succinct.



[www.TreatmentAdvocacyCenter.org](http://www.TreatmentAdvocacyCenter.org)

200 N. Glebe Road, Suite 703 ~ Arlington VA 22203 ~ 703.294.6001

## DURING THE MEETING

One thing to note as you walk into your first legislator meeting: Don't be insulted if you end up talking with a staff member. The staff member will make sure your concerns are conveyed to the legislator. In many cases the staff member assigned to a particular bill will be the person determining his or her boss' policy.

**Introduce yourself.** Give your name, address, and, if appropriate, the organization you represent or with which you are affiliated. Do not overdo your comments about the worthiness (or clout) of your organization. That is not why you are there. Even if you think it obvious, make sure to mention that he or she is your representative.

**Remain focused.** Although you probably gave your reason for visiting when scheduling the appointment, make sure it is clear that you are specifically interested in treatment law reform. Discuss only that issue (unless the legislator asks you about something else).

**Explain why you support reform.** Use either objective information or personal anecdotes - or both if possible. Make sure to use fact sheets and materials about the need for rational treatment laws or share a personal story as to how the current law prevented you or someone you love from receiving timely treatment. If visiting with another person(s), remember not to repeat each other. It is particularly helpful if you can relate how the proposed reforms would have prevented the problems you and those close to you have faced.

**Allow time for questions and be prepared to respond.** Never bluff. If you do not know the answer, it is fine to say so. You can then follow-up with the answer in a letter or phone call to the staff person the next day.

**Ask the legislator for his or her position on reform.** Although you may be hesitant to do this, it is essential to determine your representative's position.

- Tell those in favor of reform how much you appreciate their compassionate stand.
- Opponents need to know that, although you disagree with them, you welcome their open-mindedness. Perhaps later you or others will be able to provide additional information which will help change the legislator's mind.
- For those who won't give their position, ask whether you can provide additional materials to help them make a decision.
- Whatever their answer, don't burn bridges. Today's supporter may be next week's opponent and vice versa.

**Say thanks for the opportunity to visit.** No matter what the outcome, leave on friendly terms. Leave behind your packet of materials and a phone number in case they have follow-up questions.



## **AFTER THE MEETING**

**Write a follow-up thank you letter.** Be sure to follow your visit with a thank you letter and, perhaps, additional materials on the need to provide care for those suffering from mental illness. In the letter, reiterate your hope that your legislator will support this vital, life-saving legislation. Include responses to questions asked during the visit for which you did not have an answer. If you met with a staff member, send a thank you note to the legislator and send a copy to the staffer.

Remember: You can become your representative's informal advisor on treatment law reform. You can make a difference!



[www.TreatmentAdvocacyCenter.org](http://www.TreatmentAdvocacyCenter.org)

200 N. Glebe Road, Suite 703 ~ Arlington VA 22203 ~ 703.294.6001