



How to Meet with Your Elected Official

Meeting with your elected officials gives you the opportunity to share information, data and policy ideas about the issues that impact your community. Here are some tips to help you prepare.



Due to COVID-19, many in-person meetings have moved to virtual platforms, where people, regardless of their location, use an audio, video, or texting platform to connect online.

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Request a Meeting

Begin by reaching out to the official's office and requesting a meeting. While it is ideal to meet with the elected officials themselves, they may be unavailable. But you can ask to meet with the staff person in the office who handles the subject area you wish to meet about, like education or criminal justice.

Be clear about what you want to meet about and request specific dates and times to meet. If the meeting must happen virtually, determine the virtual platform you will use (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) and who will plan to host and share the link to the meeting.

Try to keep your number of participants in the meeting small so that everyone has enough time to participate.



Get Ready

Do some research. See what the elected official has done or said that is related to your issue.

If you are attending the meeting in a group, assign roles to each person.

The **Leader** will develop an agenda and introduce everyone during the meeting. The leader will help guide the conversation, ensure everyone is given a chance to speak and communicate the requests to the elected official.

The **Recorder** will work with the leader to keep the meeting on track and will take detailed notes on the meeting.

The **Participant(s)** can help by sharing personal anecdotes that highlight the needs of the community and requests made of the elected official.



The **Technology Facilitator** can assist with the virtual platforms or needs of the group. This is largely a non-speaking role meant to assist with any technology needs.

Prepare the information and key points you wish to share with the elected official and office staff.

You may only have a few chances to meet with your elected official or their staff. It is important to use the time fully and effectively. Agree to the points you would like to make within your group to avoid any disagreements during the meeting. Disagreements during the meeting will undermine your credibility and hurt the overall outcome of the meeting.

Decide what you want to get from the meeting. It is crucial to determine what your requests are and who will make them. Be specific.

Decide who will share personal stories, key facts and data. Be prepared to show how the issue is systemic, requiring policy change, rather than an isolated or individual problem.

Plan and role-play the meeting. This is crucial to making sure you hit your key points and make any requests during the meeting. Role-playing is especially important for individuals who might be sharing a difficult story and providing information for the meeting. Build into your meeting a positive environment where people feel supported and never push anyone to share something that makes them uncomfortable.

List questions the policymaker may ask or objections that can arise. Prepare your responses.

Have all the individuals joining the meeting test the virtual platform beforehand. This will help ensure when the actual meeting takes place no one is delayed and keeps you on schedule.



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Conduct the Meeting

Have the leader of the meeting introduce everyone who is present. This can help save time and keep everyone on the pre-determined agenda.

For virtual meetings, have everyone stay on mute when they are not speaking to decrease any unnecessary distractions. The leader should also be tasked with calling on individuals to talk. This will help ensure members of your group do not talk over one another.

In virtual meetings, participants should turn on their cameras if possible. Virtual meetings are more effective if people can see each other's expressions and body language. Sit closer to the camera to re-create what a traditional in-person meeting would feel like.

Be on time for the meeting and try to make yourself available based on the elected official's hectic schedule. Many elected officials have tight schedules, and any time you meet with them should be used effectively. However, understand elected officials are there to serve the public. There should be mutual respect between both parties. It is their job as public servants to hear from their constituents about the concerns that affect their district. You have the power within their office, and they should take the time to listen.

Keep the meeting tight and stay on the pre-set agenda. Make sure everyone who is supposed to speak has an opportunity. Sometimes, elected officials attempt to derail a conversation or break tension built during a meeting. The leader should help stick to the pre-determined points and requests.

Personalize the conversation with local impact statements or by detailing events that took place in the district. Legislators will be more inclined to act if they know an issue is being felt by their constituents.

Do not be worried about not knowing an answer to a question. Telling an elected official that you will get back to them with an answer provides an opportunity for follow up later. Never make up an answer. You will hurt your credibility with the office and lose out on a great chance to continue a dialogue with the office.

Set a timeline for follow-up or to receive an answer. Be sure to ask who you can contact, confirm when you can check back, and offer additional information if necessary.

Follow up Afterwards

Ask the notetaker and anyone else who took notes to review what took place during the meeting and determine what follow-up is needed for the elected official and the office.

Contact the official by email or letter to thank them for their time, provide additional information, and review your requests and any commitments made during the meeting. Be sure to provide the requested information as soon as possible.

Hold the elected official to the promised deadlines for responses and schedule follow-up actions or meetings as needed.

If necessary, schedule a debrief call to assign who will be following up on specific items.

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How to Testify before the Texas Legislature

Before any bill becomes a law, it must first be heard in both a Senate and House committee. In these public meetings, people are given an opportunity to provide testimony on, for, or against a bill.

1



Find for Your Opportunity to Testify

You can get information about committees and hearing schedules on the state legislature's website, such as Texas Legislature Online. Check the schedule at least weekly. Determine when the bill you are interested in is scheduled for a hearing and get details about the hearing process that day.

Do some research to see what the committee members have done or said regarding your issue. Understand the key points of the bill you will testify about.

Reach out to the office of the author of the bill to inform them of your position. This is even more critical if you hope to see changes and plan to oppose the bill.

This year, some committees will accept virtual testimony but some may not. It is important to provide written testimony for the committee to consider, particularly if you are unable to testify in-person or virtually. If a committee accepts virtual testimony, be sure to contact the committee clerk or director hosting the hearing to ask for directions on how to testify to ensure your testimony will be accepted by the committee.

Prepare Your Testimony

You can start writing before the hearing is scheduled. As you write, keep it succinct so that you can deliver it in two to three minutes.

Greeting and Introduction

Address the chair and the members of the committee appropriately. It can be as simple as, "Hello Chairman and members of the committee."

State your name, organization if any, and position on the bill. Remember, your position can be on, for, or against a bill and will be added to the public record once stated. This information is required by the rules of the legislature and will be reported by the committee.

If you are from one of the committee member's districts, it helps to recognize them if they are present and let them know you are a constituent.

Key Points of the Testimony

Be clear about your position on the bill and provide feedback on the bill if necessary. Begin with a strong statement that reinforces your position along with the impact of the potential legislation.

Share an anecdote that highlights the good, bad or the ugly of the proposed legislation. Sharing your own story (if you are comfortable doing so) can provide an added dimension to your testimony that will help illustrate your position for the committee. Often this is the most impactful part of your testimony and can help legislators understand the human element of the bill. Through this personal storytelling, you can make your testimony memorable, especially when many people are signed up to testify on the bill.

All testimony is public, so do not include private information, such as a student's full name.

Provide statistics or data that help support your position on the bill. This can help reinforce a personal story you share and reinforce your position with the committee members. To help build out this information, consider reaching out to IDRA's policy team for available research on education equity issues.

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Closing Statement

Summarize your position and key points and end with the personal impact of the legislation. In speeches, the most remembered parts are the beginning and end. Use your closing to restate your position and provide opportunities for follow-up with the committee members. If you have time, thank the committee chair and the members for considering your testimony.



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Register to Testify

To testify in person, you must first register for the specific hearing when you arrive. (Arrive early for hearings that are likely to draw a large crowd.) To register, you will fill out a witness affirmation form. In the Texas House this can be done electronically outside the hearing room on kiosks. In the Texas Senate, you will submit a paper form. Sometimes, online registration is open the day before the hearing.

When you choose to register a position on the bill you can choose between on, for, or against. "On" a bill means you would like to speak on the merits of the bill but do not wish to support or oppose the legislation. Registering "for" the bill indicates you or your organization would like to provide comments on why you support the bill and want it to pass. If you oppose the legislation, then you will want to register "against" the bill. This will allow you to share your concerns with the bill and provide solutions if you believe they will make the legislation better.

After you register, you will wait for the committee chairperson to call your turn. Usually, the chair will call three or four people at a time to move to the testimony table together.

If you do not wish to provide verbal testimony, you can submit testimony in writing, which is referred to as "dropping a card" to register a position on the bill.

If you are unable to participate in person, you can provide written testimony. Traditionally, written testimony will not be taken via email and would need to be delivered in person by someone who is able to attend the hearing. During the pandemic, the process may change to allow online submission in some cases.



Present Your Testimony

Keep your testimony short and concise. Most verbal testimony is limited to two to three minutes, with possible additional time to answer committee members' questions.

Even though you have prepared a beautifully-written testimony document, when you are sitting before the committee, try not to merely read your testimony out loud. Make eye contact with members of the committee. This can help legislators connect with you and your story and encourage more active listening.

Avoid confrontation. Even if a committee member or the issue is angering, watch your emotions and do not become upset. Focus on restating your key points if you are asked a question opposite of your position.

Listen to other individuals testify and avoid repeating testimony already given. You can also highlight personal experiences that support your position or previous testimony you have heard. Take note of the questions and arguments committee members raise.

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