

Talking Points for Outreach to Congress

- 1). Introduce yourself and why you care about expanding opportunities for mental health and substance use disorder prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and recovery. You know that people can and do recover from mental health disorders and addiction to alcohol and other drugs and want to make it possible for others to get the help they need to recover.
- 2). Ask that Congress pass comprehensive health reform this year that fully and equitably includes addiction and mental illness prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and recovery supports.
- 3). Over 25 million Americans suffer from untreated mental illness and/or substance use disorders. Medical experts agree that substance use disorders and mental illnesses are chronic diseases that can be prevented and treated effectively.
- 4). Only 10.4 percent of the 23.2 million people in need of help for a substance use disorder received any form of treatment in the past year.
- 5). The financial and social consequences of untreated mental illness and substance use disorders to the healthcare system, families and communities, child welfare and criminal justice systems, and to our nation as a whole, are staggering. Untreated addiction and mental illness cost the US a combined \$171 billion in lost productivity each year.
- 6). In order to increase access to vital mental health and addiction treatment services, healthcare reform legislation must include addiction and mental health in the minimum benefits package, apply the Wellstone Domenici parity law to all plans, and provide funding for addiction/mental health prevention, screening and workforce development.

10 Strategies for Using Congressional Town Hall Meetings to Advance Your Legislative Agenda

By Brad Fitch

The best political education I received was not from a graduate school course or even from working the committee rooms of Capitol Hill during my time as a congressional aide. My best lessons came when I traveled off the Hill to attend my congressman's town hall meetings.

As a press secretary for a suburban Maryland congressman, I worked the legislative issues by day and went to more than 100 town hall meetings at night. It was at places like the VFW Hall in Glen Burnie, Maryland, where I saw firsthand how certain strategies led the congressman to say during the car ride home, "We have to look into that person's issue tomorrow."

A survey by the Congressional Management Foundation showed that raising a question at a town hall meeting is one of the most effective methods for influencing undecided lawmakers. Here are the top 10 strategies for taking advantage of these unique opportunities:

1. **Be Prepared.**

Most people don't approach their Members of Congress with a well-researched, well-rehearsed pitch. Constituents who come to town hall meetings with thoughtful arguments, good data, and persuasive stories always get remembered.

2. **Tell a Personal Story.**

Members of Congress are always looking for firsthand accounts of the impact that policies have on their constituents. Think in advance of how a policy might affect you or your family, business, or community.

3. **Use Numbers If You Have Them.**

Politicians live for one thing: 50 percent plus 1. This keeps them re-elected and employed. Use numbers by mentioning things like, "I have 50 employees," "I represent 100 people in my union," or "There are 500 people in my community affected by this bill."

4. **Be Respectful.**

Some constituents start a conversation with, "I pay your salary so you better listen to me." It doesn't matter if you're talking to your grocer or a public official – starting any conversation with another person in a rude manner is not a very tactful way to persuade them.

5. **Go in Groups.**

Nothing says "listen to me" to a public official like an angry mob. This is not to suggest that you should bring pitch forks and torches to your next town hall meeting, but a chorus is better than a solo performance.

6. **Talk to Staff.**

Every Member brings staff to town hall meetings. Tell them your story before the meeting (also ask a public question during the meeting) and get their business cards.

7. **Leave Paper.**

Any documents passed to state-based staff will likely be faxed to the legislative assistant in Washington who covers your issue.

8. **Follow Up Politely.**

Politely persistent people are more likely to persuade politicians. Congressional offices are often overworked, so an elected official often responds to an individual who just follows up with a phone call a few weeks after attending a meeting

9. **Get Your People to Multiple Meetings.**

When we heard the same obscure question in Crofton as we heard in Annapolis, my Member of Congress said, "We'd better look into that." Hearing the same thing in different places signals to a politician that there may be a deeper problem afoot.

10. **Demonstrate That You're Not Going Away.**

If you continue to show your presence at town hall meetings, the legislator must deal with you, even if it's only to avoid an uncomfortable encounter at a future town hall meeting.

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