

# VISITING YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS

## MEETING WITH YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Meeting with members of Congress, or their staff, is an important way to educate them about the issues that are important to transgender people.

Preparing for your visit can help ensure a successful and smooth visit with members of Congress. Here are some things to consider.

### INTRODUCTIONS

When you arrive, each team member should introduce themselves. Say your name and that you are a constituent, a veteran, a parent or anything else that might be important to the legislator. Note if you have a connection with your representative.

You may wish to bring a business card with your contact information.

### BE ON TIME

It is very important to arrive on time. If you are late, you are likely to miss your appointment entirely. Plan plenty of time to travel to the office just in case an emergency arises.

Always be brief and stay on point—your meeting time will be very limited, usually fifteen to twenty minutes. This is when your team’s preparation pays off. Having your general talking points written up will help you present your information clearly and directly.

#### Sample Introduction:

Good afternoon, Senator O’Brien. My name is Patsy Anderson, and I am a lifelong resident of our state, as you are. I am a cross dresser and was the founder of Feminine Spirits, our local advocacy and support group. I very much appreciate this opportunity to talk with you about some important issues for our community.

#### Sample Introduction:

Hello, Congresswoman Martinez. My name is Joe Gardner, I’m a new resident of our state, and a member of my local Union. I lost my last job when my employer found out that I am a female to male transsexual. I want to thank you for your consistent support of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act that would ban this kind of discrimination.

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## WHAT TO SAY

When speaking with your Congressperson, the most important things to talk about are personal experiences of discrimination against yourself or people you know. Refer to local examples of discrimination and violence—personal accounts are the most likely to affect your Congressperson.

Painting the realities that the transgender community faces is essential for gaining the support of our representatives. However, it is critical that you keep your remarks brief and to the point.

Stay focused so that you will be understood and make your point well since a short, articulate statement will be far more effective than an elaborate story. Congresspeople have limited time and many issues to focus on—help them by being as clear as you can be.

Avoid theoretical discussions—they are not a productive way to communicate with your Congressperson and are only likely to cause frustration. For example, engaging in a complicated analysis of gender theory will not be helpful unless he or she specifically asks for this. Instead, focus on telling your personal account and asking your member of Congress to support specific changes in policy.

Share only appropriate information in the meeting. Be sensitive to the fact that some people are uncomfortable hearing about the body and may not want to know specifics. It is better to talk about the impact of violence on an individual without graphic descriptions of the attack and about the need for health care advocacy while leaving out the intimate details of an individual's medical care. In some segments of our society, it is considered rude and inappropriate to discuss the specifics of any kind of surgery; therefore, it is best to refer to surgery only in the most general terms, if at all. Most members of Congress do not have any medical training and discussing medical conditions with them can be confusing.

Also, remember that many people continue to confuse issues of sexuality with issues of gender. Therefore, it is helpful to stay on topic and focus on gender, and avoid conversations about sexuality or genitals. Some people are uncomfortable with these topics, especially in public and work settings, so it is best to be discreet.

Speak slowly and clearly, without using jargon, slang, acronyms, abbreviations or terms that other people may find offensive. Use “transgender” rather than “TG” and “cross dresser” instead of “CD” or “transvestite.” Do not assume that people will understand terms like MTF, FTM or “transition.” Many people speak too quickly if they are nervous, so pay attention to how you are talking so that you will be sure you are being understood.

An underlying message to your visit should be that there are a lot more transgender people than members of Congress think, and that we live in their districts or states.

If you are participating in NCTE's Lobby Day, you will receive a briefing and training to help you prepare for your meeting. We will help you get up to date on the latest issues and give you information to leave behind.

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Speak positively about transgender people and do not disparage other people or their positions, even if you don't agree with them. Make your own position clear and let it speak for itself.

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## ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Listen carefully to what your Congressperson has to say and clearly and succinctly answer any questions she or he asks.

If you do not know something, do not make it up. Explain that you do not know the answer and offer to follow-up with the information. If you do offer this, make sure you really do follow-up.

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## DETERMINE WHERE YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS STANDS ON OUR ISSUES

In addition to educating the legislator on transgender issues, it is important that you leave knowing whether the legislator would be supportive of trans-inclusive legislation. When you are about 75% through the allotted time and have given your basic presentation, it is time to get a better idea of your Congressperson's thoughts if she or has not made them clear to you already. Consider asking the following questions, in your own words, to determine where your legislator stands:

- Is there anything else that you need to know to help you to better understand the issues faced by transgender people?
- Would you co-sponsor legislation that includes protections based on gender identity and expression?
- If you will not co-sponsor trans-inclusive legislation, would you be willing to vote for or support such legislation?

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## LEAVE INFORMATION

It can be helpful to leave information behind for the member of Congress and his or her staff to consider later. However, resist the urge to leave a large packet of information—legislators and staff simply will not have time to read it. A one-page leave behind that covers the important facts is perfectly adequate. You can contact NCTE for one to use.

**Telling Your Story: An Example**  
My name is Jordan and I'd like to tell you a bit about myself. Ever since I was a little kid, I've been uncomfortable having to identify as either male or female. My parents tried to push me into one box or the other at first, but then they realized that this is who I am and supported me. School was okay until high school, when things got pretty rough. I almost dropped out after getting beaten up a couple of times on my way home from school by kids who called me a queer. I had some great teachers, though, who really encouraged me to stay in school. Now I'm attending college in our state at Springfield University and I've found that to be a great experience. There is a great Resource Center for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students. Because of my experiences in high school, I'm here to ask you to support safer school legislation which would protect students like me from violence and discrimination.

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**ENDING THE APPOINTMENT**

Remember that most appointments are brief—about fifteen to twenty minutes. Leave gracefully when your time is up and be careful not to overstay your welcome. If you are invited to stay longer, by all means do so if you have the time.

Be sure to thank everyone who has been in the meeting for their time.

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**MEETING STAFF INSTEAD OF THE MEMBER OF CONGRESS**

If your member of Congress is not available to meet with you, you may be asked to meet with a staff person instead. This is not a negative thing. Legislators rely a great deal on their staffs and receive detailed reports on every visit they do with constituents. So, while meeting with the actual member of Congress is ideal, meeting with staff people is also extremely helpful. If you found the staff to be helpful, write to your Congressperson to let him or her know that you appreciated the staff's courtesy. Also, keep in mind that occasionally something unforeseen comes up and, even if you were expecting to meet with the actual legislator, you may see a staffer instead.

Often meeting with a staff member first, or even several times, can help you get in to see the actual member of Congress in the future. Remember that staff members can be very important in shaping legislation and policy, so do meet with them.

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**AFTER A MEETING WITH YOUR CONGRESSPERSON**

Each visitor should send a thank you note immediately—this is a quick and easy way to further your relationship with your Congressperson. If you also met with someone on the Congressperson's staff, write them a separate thank you note as well. Be sure to follow up as soon as possible with any promised additional information.

NCTE would love to hear how your visit went, so feel free to contact us by phone or email at [ncte@nctequality.org](mailto:ncte@nctequality.org).

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**IF YOU NEED ASSISTANCE OR HAVE OTHER QUESTIONS**

Please contact NCTE for additional assistance if you need it. We would be glad to work with you to help you meet with your member of Congress. We can provide information and assistance to you to help make the meeting a success. We also want to know how the meeting went so that we can better understand the positions that your Representative and Senators are taking.