



advanced initiatives
in medical simulation

Top Ten Tips for Meeting with Your Members of Congress and Their Staffers

Meetings with Members of Congress and/or their staffs are terrific ways for health care professionals and supporters of medical simulation to communicate with policymakers on issues of interest and priority. Such meetings can be conducted at Congressional offices in Washington, DC, or “at-home” in district offices and if done correctly, can result in garnering support for AIMS and SSH public policy priorities. Visiting with them enables you to educate them about your concerns, offer yourselves as a resource, and establish a relationship that can prove mutually beneficial over time. It is best to build a relationship before you need it.

Prior to arriving in Washington, DC, or at the district office, be sure to contact the office and schedule a meeting with the Member of Congress with the staffer or through the appointment secretary/scheduler. Be clear about who will attend and what issue(s) will be discussed. The day before, confirm the appointment as the Congressional schedule changes very often, and such changes often are beyond Congressional staff control.

In advance of the meeting, be sure to put together some “leave-behind” materials that you will provide to the Member/staffer at the end of your discussion. Spend some time on the AIMS website to learn more about the specific legislation and medical simulation community “asks.”

- 1. Prepare and be on time.** Members of Congress and their staff are very busy and often have to be in more than one place at a time. Be respectful of their time by giving yourself plenty of time to go through security, find your way to the office, and announce yourself to the receptionist. If you will be attending in a group, discuss with your colleagues in advance what you will be covering in the meeting. Be sure to select a primary spokesperson and determine who in the group will raise which points and requests. You should be clear about your roles and who will cover the different topics in the meeting. Open by thanking the Member/staffer for his or her time. Be sure that everyone in the group identifies herself/himself – first and last name and connection to medical simulation – and remember to mention that you are a voting constituent and provide some context about where you live/work in the district/state. If the Member/staffer has been helpful in the past or has taken action that you appreciate, be sure to say thank you up front. Prior to your meeting with the Member/staffer, it is best to get a sense of what matters currently are pending before the Congress, and the committee(s) on which the Member sits.

2. **Be brief and clear**, as you typically will have only 10–25 minutes for the entire meeting. Cover only a few (one to three) topics. It is best to prepare talking points beforehand to ensure that you and your colleagues “stay on message.” Anticipate the kinds of questions you may be asked from both supporters and opponents. Do your best to be prepared to answer such questions in the meeting. If you do not know the answer, acknowledge that, and indicate that you will follow-up later (and remember to do so). Do not assume that the Member/staffer is very knowledgeable about the issue you are discussing – be sure to provide them with some background. If you are not discussing a specific piece of legislation, explain that you want to provide background information or provide your perspective on an issue of importance to you and your community.
3. **Provide a personal story or real-life illustration** of the problem, as personal stories are more easily remembered and more compelling than statistics. As necessary, briefly cite evidence or statistics to support your position, particularly any local, regional, or state data. However, be sure not to overwhelm the policymaker or staffer with too many statistics or references to studies (this kind of information can be in the materials you leave behind or can be sent with your thank-you note). Be concise and honest about the issue(s) and the solution(s) and make clear the relevance of the issue(s) to their constituents.
4. **Be polite and listen carefully** to the policymakers’ or staffers’ views and comments. Even if you disagree, it is important to be courteous. Be flexible and consider the opposing view. Do not be argumentative or threatening. You may agree to disagree on an issue today and find that you can agree and work together on another matter tomorrow. Much of health policy advocacy is about building and maintaining relationships.
5. **Make sure to get a response – in a nice way.** Ask directly, and politely, for the policymaker’s views and position on the issue. Do not let the policymaker or staffer distract you with other issues (gently steer the conversation back to your issue), avoid responding, or dismiss your specific concerns with a broad statement such as, “I support simulation.” Stay on message and the topic as politely as possible. It is your Constitutional right to “petition Congress for redress of grievances” – so take this opportunity to do what you can to get a commitment from the Member to take action on your request(s). However, if the Member truly is undecided or the staffer is not familiar with the Member’s position on the issue, do not force a response – reiterate your interest in knowing the Member’s position, offer to answer any additional questions/provide additional information, and request a follow-up letter once a decision has been made on your request.
6. **Bring a concise set of materials with you to leave behind.** However, do not hand over the materials until the close of the meeting, or the Member/staffer may choose to start reading the material and only listen to you with one ear. Early in the meeting indicate that you have materials to leave on the topic(s). Be sure to follow-up and follow through on any promises of additional information.

7. **Leave your contact information.** If you leave a business card, make it clear that you are visiting on your own time and not representing your employer unless you have received such clearance. Be sure to get a business card from the Member/staffer so that you know how to reach them. Be sure to ask the Member/staffer their preferred mode of communication (e.g. e-mail, faxes, voicemail/phone).
8. **Summarize your requests of the Member/office** and any responses the Member/staffer have given to ensure you are clear on where they stand on the issues. Summarize the Member's/staffer's requests and indicate how you plan to respond. Express thanks and appreciation for their time, interest, and courtesy. Ask politely for a good day in the next week to 10 days for you to follow up on your request(s).
9. **Report back to AIMS and SSH** so others can follow-up with the office with additional information and reinforce the message(s) you delivered. For support of your advocacy efforts or to report back from a meeting, please e-mail info@medsim.org.
10. **Follow-up with a thank you note** to the Member/staffer referencing the date of your meeting, who was in attendance, and the issues you discussed. Your follow-up letter should express appreciation for the time and consideration extended to you during your meeting, reiterate your request(s), and ask for a written response from the office. Be sure to call/e-mail/write with answers or information the Member/staffer requested. Be sure to keep in touch with the Member/staffer to maintain and strengthen the relationship and make yourself available as a local resource on medical simulation. There are times when you and an elected official will have to "agree to disagree" but over time, you also may find that the policymaker may be supportive and helpful on other matters. Great ways to keep in touch are sending an article of interest from the local paper, or inviting the Member/staffer to attend an event or tour your local simulation center when they next are visiting.

Other Tips

When visiting Capitol Hill or a federal building in which your Member of Congress maintains an office, you could encounter long lines to get through security (bags and all contents from your pockets must be put through the X-ray machines and you must step through a metal detector). Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time to get through security.

If your initial meeting is in Washington, DC, be sure to schedule a similar meeting with the staff in the district or state office and check in with your policymaker when s/he is at home visiting to reinforce the relationship and follow up on your issues of priority.

The Congressional schedule is very fluid and Members and staffers often are pulled away for various events and activities that are not known in advance (e.g., last minute press conference, meeting with the Chairman of a committee the Member sits on, etc.), and your meeting could be delayed or bumped (the Member may not be available, and you instead may meet with staff). Also, space on Capitol Hill is at a premium, so your meeting could occur in the reception area in the office, in the hallway, or downstairs in the coffee shop. Do not take any last minute meeting changes personally, and make sure you always are gracious and flexible.