

Chapter 13

Being an Effective Advocate at a Congressional Town Hall Meeting

One of the most effective – and underutilized – ways to communicate directly with Members of Congress is to attend their town hall meetings. Almost every Member holds these events during “District Work Periods” (the time when they are at-home) to elicit input and learn the priorities and concerns of their constituents.

A *Town Hall Meeting* is a concept that originated in New England when everyone in the town showed up to speak their opinion and then vote on a particular issue. Today, with large heterogeneous communities, town hall meetings are held so people can influence elected officials in their decision making. Town hall meetings hosted by Members of Congress can be held in a variety of locations such as a community center, a veterans’ hospital, a local college, or a church or synagogue.

Because Members pay particular attention to attendees at these meetings, participating allows you to bring forward ARN’s concerns in a public forum and amplify your voice with Members of Congress. Legislative and political professionals in Washington anxiously await reports from advocates who attend these meetings. In fact, one of the best results from a series of the town hall meetings is for Members of Congress to return to Washington telling their staff, “those rehabilitation nurses” were everywhere.

Members of Congress take to heart what they hear directly from constituents who make the effort to show up at a town hall meeting. Attendance shows both commitment and organizational ability. From the other side of the podium, Members see attendees first and foremost as concerned voters. In addition, members of the media often attend these meetings providing another opportunity to spread the message. The most successful grassroots organizations, like AARP, effectively utilize town hall meetings.

Many of the tips for attending a town hall meeting are similar to tips for successful Congressional Meetings (see Chapter 12). While many of the protocols are similar, the format is quite different. Some town hall meetings might be focused on a specific issue (e.g. Social Security, Medicare prescription drugs, etc.); however, most meetings tend to be more free-form and offer an opportunity for general comments/questions at the end.

American citizens have the right to petition government for redress of grievances and town hall meetings are a terrific forum to call upon elected officials to take action on the issues we care most about. The more often you attend and ask a question or praise a Member for doing something you support, the stronger and more meaningful your relationship will be with the Member and their staff.

Top Ten Tips for Congressional Town Hall Meetings

While some of the steps outlined below may seem quite obvious, when combined, they will guarantee your attendance at a congressional town hall meeting will have long-term benefits and be fun and effective!

1. **Sign-up for the alert list for your Members' meetings.** Most Members will announce their schedules via mailings or e-mails to the district and often through the media. However, offices will directly contact constituents who have expressed an interest in knowing the information. In fact, many offices only will provide the actual information on meeting times and locations directly to constituents. For example, Representative Elijah Cummings (D-MD) offers constituents the opportunity to subscribe to his constituent newsletter (which lists local events and appearances). *Remember: if you provide an e-mail or mailing address, be sure to use your home/personal information, and not that of your employer.*
2. **Learn the Established Procedures.** Upon arriving at the town hall meeting, check to see whether there is an established procedure for the meeting. For example, most offices will provide a place for constituents to sign in. Often there is a separate sign up sheet for individuals who would like to ask questions. *Remember: check with the staff when you arrive about the proper procedure, and be sure to comply.*
3. **Be prepared in advance with your specific question.** Bring supporting materials that you can provide to the staffer, who will be traveling with/accompanying the Member. Also, be sure to avoid long, drawn out questions, and do not use jargon or acronyms that people may not know – you do not want to annoy or alienate the Member, staff, audience, or media. *Remember: visit the ARN Legislative Action Center in advance to download any materials or background you may need.*
4. **Clearly identify yourself and your affiliation with ARN.** Let them know whom you are representing. Unlike meetings on Capitol Hill where the Member and staff know with whom they are meeting, anyone can show up at a town hall meeting. Consider your introduction to be an integral part of your question.
5. **Be polite and professional.** It goes without saying, but be polite and professional. Keep in mind that the media is probably attending, as well as other potential allies in your efforts. *Remember: even if the Member does not agree with you or evades your question and it is frustrating, you are most effective by being polite, calm, and persistent.*
6. **Ask for a response to your question.** If she/he cannot give you a response, let the Member know you will be arranging another opportunity for further discussion and that you look forward to a response at that time. The point is not to embarrass the Member, but to engage him/her and seem reasonable. *Remember: you can always follow-up from your question at the town hall meeting with a formal letter. You should reference your attendance at the meeting, giving the date and location, and ask for follow-up from your inquiry.*

7. **Use your judgment.** The dynamics of town hall meetings can be shaped by factors beyond your control. If the audience is riled up over an issue unrelated to the concerns of ARN, and you get the feeling that participating would be counter-productive, it might be best to stay silent or take a pass when given the opportunity to ask a question. *Remember: you will have future opportunities to attend another town hall meeting and/or visit with the Member in a different setting. You can always follow-up with your question via a formal letter.*
8. **Introduce Yourself to the Member.** Depending on the setting and the number of people attending, make an effort to say hello and introduce yourself to the Member and the staffer before or after the meeting. Be sure to give them any materials you brought along with your personal/home contact information. *Remember: ask for the staffer's name and request a business card, so you know with whom you should follow-up.*
9. **Report back to ARN on the results of the meeting.** Identify any outstanding issues and information that the Member needs. Your report-back allows ARN to echo/follow-up on the message you delivered "at-home" to your Member in Washington and capitalize on your good work at the town hall meeting. *Remember: ARN needs to hear from you about what you are doing back at home to ensure that we have a coordinated "book-end" approach to our advocacy program.*
10. **Follow-up.** Send (by fax or e-mail, whichever is the office/staffers' preferred mode of communication) a letter to the Member and staff person. Remind them that you were at the town hall meeting, giving the date and location, and reiterate the issue you discussed. Even if you did not get to ask a specific question publicly, send a follow-up letter about your presence at the meeting. If there was anything that the Member or staff requested, be sure to provide that in your follow-up correspondence.