



Community for Advancing Discovery Research in Education

Conducting Legislative Visits

Why Communicate with Legislators and Their Staff?

Funding for the National Science Foundation (NSF) is contingent on legislative support. Because of this, it is important for NSF awardees to communicate with legislators about the value and importance of their projects. This is especially true for legislators who sit on committees relevant to STEM education.

As a government agency, NSF does not engage in lobbying efforts; therefore, these legislative visits are purely informational. The purpose of your visit is to help legislators and their staff understand the NSF-funded work conducted in their districts/states and what is happening with your project in particular. Think of it as using your work to establish an ongoing relationship with your legislator. This resource offers tips for making the most out of your legislative visit.

Scheduling Legislative Visits

- Reach out to your institution to ask what support they can offer. Start with the public relations office or comparable department. They may be able to schedule your meeting or help you prepare materials.
- Identify your members of Congress:
<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members>

(Note: www.govtrack.us is a tool that allows you to search for your members of Congress, link to their official websites, identify their committee memberships, access summaries of their sponsored legislation and voting record, and more.)

- For an informational visit, you will likely meet with a legislative assistant. Meeting with House staffers and Senate staffers is equally important, so try to set up meetings with both offices. If you are unable to schedule meetings with both, paying particular attention to the legislators' respective committee memberships might be a helpful way to prioritize your visits. *(Note: Because congressional districts are smaller, it may be possible for House staffers to relate more easily to the work happening in their districts.)*
- Email or call the legislators' offices one month in advance to schedule a meeting with a legislative assistant. When calling, ask to speak to the person responsible for scheduling. Let them know you are a constituent, and briefly describe the nature of your visit. If possible, offer a few dates and times for a possible meeting, and be flexible.
- Ask how much time the legislative assistant has available to meet with you. This will help you plan your visit accordingly.
- Call the office the week before the visit to confirm the date and time.
- Be on time. Don't forget to factor in possible traffic, public transportation delays, distance between House offices and Senate offices, and long lines for security at the building entrances.

Tip: Learn common staff titles and principal functions of key staff.
Where to start? [Roles of Congressional Staff](#)

Preparing Your Message

- Plan on having 15–20 minutes to meet with the legislative assistant, but understand that this can vary, and be patient if they are late or get called away. At the start of the meeting, confirm how much time they have available in case their schedule has changed. This will help you adjust your presentation as needed before getting started.
- It is possible to meet with a legislative assistant one on one or as a group. For group meetings, select three to five people from your state (or district, if possible). Adjust the number accordingly based on how much time you have to meet with the legislative assistant. Aim for giving each person five minutes to present.
- Understand your legislators' priorities. Research their voting history and sponsored legislation. Follow your representative and senators on social media and/or sign up for their mailing lists to remain up to date on current news. Familiarize yourself with what's happening in your legislators' committees so you can connect your presentation to high-priority issues.
- Connect your presentation to broader needs and issues of concern in the district/state, as well as concerns of national importance. For example, how is your project working to expand access to STEM education for underrepresented populations in your district/state and prepare students for the STEM workforce?
- Expect to be presenting to an education- or science-related legislative assistant. This person will be highly educated but is not likely to have a thorough understanding of NSF's funding programs or the projects in them. Structure your presentation for a general audience using clear, concise language and no jargon.
- Example agenda:
 - Description of your project, including how it is addressing a problem/issue of national importance in STEM education and why it is relevant for your district/state
 - Emerging findings from your work and implications for the district/state and beyond

Tip: Explore [Vital Signs](#), the [NSF Congress Toolkit](#), and the [NSF Program Awards by State/District](#) to learn more about the state of STEM where you live and work.

Meeting with Legislative Assistants

- Keep in mind that this is an informational meeting. Your goal is to share information about your project and educate the legislative assistant about the issues your work seeks to address.
- If you are meeting with the legislative assistant as a group but you are not all from the same district, have the constituent from the representative's district present first. (*Note: It would be appropriate for you to meet with staffers outside of your state if your project work is being conducted in that legislator's state, but keep this structure for group meetings in mind.*)
- Tell a short but engaging story that demonstrates why your project is valuable (e.g., a story that illustrates the problem your project is designed to address or describes an opportunity that exists because of your project work). The goal is to make the story relatable. Do this by connecting your work to key issues that the legislator supports or that are of importance to their constituency or the

Tip: Find where your [representatives](#) and [senators](#) are located. [See how they voted](#) on different issues. Use this [Map of the Hill](#) to find their offices.

country. Making connections between your work and their priorities can help them understand why this work is important.

- If you encounter resistance, keep the focus on the impact of your work.
- Bring a camera for a photo with the legislative staff. You can share the photo with your institution or on social media. This helps others see that stories from your project are being communicated.
- Be sure to get the legislative assistant's contact information. Also ask for potential contacts in the legislators' state and local offices.
- Leave behind two informational packets: one for the legislative assistant and one for the legislator. Include information about NSF, a copy of your short story, and any handouts or brochures related to your project. You can give these materials to the legislative assistant at the end of the meeting or at the beginning of the meeting if you plan to reference the materials and want them to follow along. Also send electronic copies of these materials when you follow up.

Tip: Stay up to date on federal science policy news. The American Institute of Physics, for ex., produces a [newsletter with STEM policy updates](#).

After Your Visit

- Follow up the meeting with a thank you note to the legislative assistant. Include electronic versions of your meeting materials, and address any questions that may have come up during your meeting.
- Keep in touch. Now that your legislator has information about your project, invite them and their staff to relevant events, or to observe your work in schools. Keep them updated as your project progresses.

Sources

- [ACTE Advocacy Toolkit: Visiting Policymakers](#)
- [AERA Advocacy Toolkit](#)
- [AERA Webcasts on Communicating Locally with Federal Policymakers](#)
- [CIRCL's Communicating with Policy Makers Webinar](#)
- [Public Policy Advocacy: The Basics](#)
- [Step-by-Step Guide to Legislative Visits](#)