

## HOW TO ... Talk to Congress

**O**ur goal is to modernize our immigration system so that it works for all of our nation's businesses, families, and communities. To achieve this, a significant amount of our effort must be focused on communicating with Congress in order to educate them about how our current system works and to advocate for necessary changes.

There are a lot of important ways to communicate with members of Congress and their staff.

### PHONE CALLS AND URGENT ACTION E-MAILS:

During key votes on immigration legislation, it's crucial that we register our opinion with congressional offices so that our senators and representatives know how their constituents feel about the issue.

### ACTION ALERTS!

- **The Senate is voting on the DREAM Act—call or email your senators and register your support!**
- **The House is about to vote on an amendment to prohibit immigrant children from receiving health care—call or email your Representative and express your opposition!**

Calling and emailing is key during immigration votes because many congressional offices keep a running tally of the vote-specific communications they receive; typically, the pro-immigration side is grossly outnumbered and that's why it is crucial that we are diligent about contacting Congress during key votes.

### PETITIONS, POSTCARDS, AND GENERAL EMAILS:

There are lots of opportunities to send messages to Congress. Whether a canvasser comes to your door with a petition to sign, an activist greets you in front of the local supermarket and hands you a postcard to mail, or a website directs you to an email to send to your congressperson, you are presented with a chance to tell your elected officials how you feel about specific political issues. Taking a few moments to sign your name, lick a stamp, or click send is a fast and easy way to draw attention to a cause or concern. Because it's always beneficial to keep immigration relevant on Capitol Hill, we encourage you to send emails through AILA's Contact Congress website (<http://capwiz.com/aila2/home/>). The emails are pre-written and all you have to do is enter your name and zipcode and the message will be sent directly to your senators and representatives.

## PERSONAL LETTERS:

Congressional House and Senate offices receive thousands of pieces of mail each month. In order to make any written communications stand out among the rest, it's important to personalize any letter sent to elected officials. Personal stories from constituents can go a long way to influence opinion on Capitol Hill. The Congressional Management Foundation recently held focus groups with congressional staff and found that:

*Focus group participants indicated that constituent communications were particularly helpful or influential early on in a decision-making process, when Members and staff are researching and developing policy positions. Staff reported that well-reasoned letters from constituents often helped them assess the impact of pending legislation or proposals on a particular group, or on the district or state as a whole (CMF, 20).*

## TOWN HALL MEETINGS:

Members of Congress often schedule town hall-style or public meetings in their districts. This is a good way for them to get out and talk to their constituents and “take the pulse” of the communities they represent in Congress. It is also a great opportunity for AILA advocates to educate and inform senators, representatives, and other meeting attendees about the need to modernize our immigration law and policy.

Consider attending a town hall meeting with your AILA colleagues to show collective support for your shared ideals. Generating a large and well-informed crowd at a public meeting is an extremely effective way to elicit the views of your member of Congress and to share your perspective, not to mention helpful on the off chance that other meeting attendees are hostile to your question or the immigration issue. Once you've arranged to attend the town hall meeting together with your chapter colleagues, jointly draft some questions and comments for the host. Questions and comments should be well thought out and to the point because long, laborious questions and speeches will only turn off others in the crowd, including the press. To keep the audience's attention, you may want to relate your question to a real-life example or experience that will help to humanize the politics of immigration. Above all, remember that this is your opportunity, as a constituent, to stand up and ask the senator or representative a pointed question about an issue of concern.

For example, you should tailor your questions to draw out substantive, non-generic answers. Even if your representative voted against the DREAM Act, you can ask her to elaborate on her position: What, specifically, does she oppose about putting high achieving young people on a path to permanent residence?

If your member of Congress staunchly opposes meaningful immigration reform, you may want to use the town hall meeting as an opportunity to deliver a coordinated letter of rebuke from all of the members of your chapter. Or you may want to evaluate the central arguments the member of Congress has against immigration reform and prepare yourself with a few basic statistics that could refute those arguments – see the final section of AILA's Tools of Engagement for Talking Points.

In some cases, a member of Congress may be unfamiliar with the details of the legislation you wish to discuss. She may refer you to a legislative aide or other staff expert who can better respond to your question. In this situation, make sure to get the full name and contact information of this staff person so that you can raise your question with him or her.

As always, follow-up is important. If you get an opportunity to ask a question or talk to a member you should follow it up a day or so later with a letter. This is your chance to thank the member for meeting with you and for supporting your views, or if they don't, to encourage reconsideration. It is always important to be respectful and courteous regardless of the member's views and to represent your organization in a professional manner.

Report any happenings back to AILA by emailing [advocacy@aila.org](mailto:advocacy@aila.org).

## **8 STEPS FOR ATTENDING AND MAKING THE MOST OF A TOWN HALL MEETING WITH YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS**

1. Check your local paper for announcements about town hall meetings held in your area.
2. Work with your chapter's Executive Committee to coordinate a group of chapter colleagues to attend the town hall meeting together.
3. Research your members of Congress and find out how they voted on on key immigration issues at [www.aila.org/advocacy](http://www.aila.org/advocacy).
4. Review AILA's resources and materials to bolster your familiarity with the current immigration debate – start with the materials in the last section of AILA's Tools of Engagement.
5. Prepare educated, open-ended questions for your member of Congress with the intention of drawing out substantive, non-generic answers.
6. Contact the local media – let reporters know that you and your AILA colleagues will be attending the town hall meeting and intend to ask immigration-related questions. Visit AILA's Media Center to email the local media: <http://capwiz.com/aila2/dbq/media/> and review the next section of AILA's Tools of Engagement for other ideas about working with the press.
7. Submit letters-to-the-editor or op-eds before or after the town hall meeting. Town hall meetings held by members of Congress will make timely letters-to-the-editor and opinion pieces about your elected officials' voting records
8. Attend the meeting and engage the member of Congress in a discussion about immigration, being sure to draw out substantive responses, and also get the name and contact information of the member's legislative aide working on immigration issues. Follow up with a letter to both the member of Congress and her staff expert.

## **IN-PERSON MEETINGS:**

Face-to-face meetings are the most effective way to influence your legislators and build relationships with their key staff members. You can meet with them either in their district offices or in Washington, D.C. If you are unable to see your legislators in person, you should still meet with their staffers.

In the district offices, staff typically handle constituent services and immigration case-work and are the legislator's constant connection to their constituents. Meeting with them is a good opportunity to present yourself as a resource on legal matters and also to help connect the dots between compelling immigration cases and the imperfections in our existing immigration laws. Helping the member of Congress understand the direct correlation between the treatment of immigrants under the law and our fractured immigration policy is a huge step towards achieving our advocacy goals.

In the D.C. offices, staff work on legislation, regulatory, and policy issues every day and greatly influence their bosses' positions and votes. Prior to any major actions on legislation, the relevant staffer is usually tasked with writing a policy memo for the member of Congress. The memo briefly explains the issue, the potential impact of the legislation, and also provides a vote recommendation. Meeting with these staff members, usually called legislative assistants, is an opportunity to inform that memo by explaining the practical implications of immigration law. It's also a time to give real life examples of how immigrants and their families as well as U.S. businesses and communities are affected by our immigration policy.

Here are some tips for arranging your meetings with members of Congress or their staff:

### ***Arranging the Appointment***

1. Call your legislator's office and ask to speak to the staffer responsible for scheduling meetings with the member of Congress and the person who handles immigration for the office. Find out their preferred method for appointment requests (fax, email, or over the phone). You can find telephone numbers for the D.C. and district offices on AILA's Contact Congress website. Generally, members of Congress are in Washington Tuesday through Thursday and are frequently home Friday through Monday and when Congress is not in session.
2. Let the scheduler know the purpose of the meeting and who will be attending. Make sure to mention that you are a constituent!

### ***Going as a Group? Coordinate Your Lobby Team***

1. Be organized. Before your meeting, designate a team leader to introduce the issue and handle the flow of the meeting, a secretary to take notes, and assign each participant a priority issue to bring up during the meeting.

2. Make sure everyone in your group is prepared. Brief everyone attending the meeting and make sure they have reviewed any relevant background information ahead of time.
3. If you are going as part of a larger group or coalition, meet ahead of time. It is unwise to have an internal debate or conversation in front of your elected official or his or her staff. Be certain everyone agrees on your group's central message and what you want to ask the legislator to do for you.

### ***Preparing for the Meetings***

1. **DO YOUR HOMEWORK!** Know exactly what you want to say and carefully review your message. Use the materials provided at the end of AILA's Tools of Engagement!
2. If possible, compile information about the impact of specific immigration issues on the legislator's district/state. Do not compile a long list of statistics; your elected officials will not remember them and they will lose their impact. Prepare a few dramatic numbers or anecdotes to illustrate your points. Collect recent local news articles that illustrate the issue. Like most people, legislators and staff more easily remember examples conveyed in human and personal terms.
3. To encourage legislators to support a specific immigration issue, present materials that clearly articulate your position, using specific case examples when possible.
4. Know the counter-arguments and be ready to respectfully answer any questions or disagreements. Call the AILA Advocacy Department for more information and assistance.
5. Prepare a packet to leave with your legislator that could include background information, fact sheets and/or newspaper clippings. Attach your business card(s) to the packet.

### ***Making the Presentation***

1. Be on time!
2. Begin by introducing yourselves.
3. Explain to the legislator/staffer why you asked for the meeting.
4. Present your concerns simply and directly. Get to your "bottom line" immediately. Be brief, direct, courteous and positive. When presenting each issue, do not assume that your legislator has any prior knowledge of the subject. Presentation of each topic roughly should follow this outline:

*BACKGROUND: Explain the need to change our immigration laws in the simplest possible terms.*

*IMPACT: Explain how immigrants and immigration directly benefit your community and how our broken immigration laws hold us back as a nation.*

*RECOMMENDATION: Indicate what you would like your legislator to do. Discuss important immigration legislation or issues currently before Congress and how you hope he or she will vote. If you want your elected officials to support a specific issue, explain how your community has been impacted, and the consequences in concrete terms if, for example, Congress does not pass immigration reform that would legalize the status of hardworking people already in the U.S., create a new future flow program, and reduce family backlogs. Finally, ask your legislator to support legislation that would authorize such reform.*

5. Do not fight with your legislator or staff members. Politely answer questions and concerns, but if you disagree, make your point and move on. Remember, you are meeting with the member or staff person to inform him/her about your positions on issues.
6. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so, and promise to get back with the answer. Be sure to follow up with your answer as quickly as possible after the meeting.
7. Make sure you do not do all of the talking! Give your legislator opportunities to ask questions or state his or her opinion. Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard. Also ask questions.
8. Stay away from jargon and acronyms. Remember that your legislator deals with dozens, if not hundreds, of issues each week, each with its own “language.”
9. Thank your legislators if they have been supportive. They get thanked far less than they get criticized. They will appreciate your recognition.
10. Be sure to ask for your legislator’s support. If your legislator already is very supportive, ask him or her to cosponsor the relevant bill and/or take a leadership role in moving the bill through the process, getting additional cosponsors, or other ways.

### ***Following Up After the Meeting***

1. Send a note thanking the member or staff person for meeting with you. Briefly summarize the main points of the meeting.
2. Remember to follow up with responses to any questions the member or staff person asked but you could not answer at the time.

3. The information you learn in your meeting will be helpful for AILA staff and our allies. Debrief AILA staff so that we can develop a coordinated legislative strategy and message for your district. Contact the Advocacy Department to report back about your meeting: (202) 507-7611 or [advocacy@aila.org](mailto:advocacy@aila.org).
4. Do not think of the meeting as an isolated event. Although you may not have a face-to-face meeting again for some time, periodically check in with the staff person and find out if you can provide any new information about immigration. You can also invite your elected officials to speak at an event or meeting – like Citizenship Day or a breakfast for congressional staff.

Here is a sample Appointment-Request E-mail that you can modify to meet the needs of your own meeting with your legislator.

From: Mandel, Michael [<mailto:mmandel@wkgj.com>]  
To: Connolly, Brenda  
Cc: Perler, Andrea  
Subject: Immigration Advocacy – April 7

Dear Representative Ackerman:

We are contacting you on behalf of the New York Chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA). AILA is a nationwide bar association of over 11,000 lawyers who are involved with various aspects of immigration law. The New York Chapter is the country's largest, with more than 1,100 members. Our members represent U.S. citizens who sponsor foreign family members, U.S. businesses that employ foreign workers, foreign nationals and legal residents faced with deportation, and individuals seeking refuge under U.S. asylum laws, among others. Additional information about AILA and the work we do is available at [www.aila.org](http://www.aila.org).

AILA is holding a National Day of Action to focus on immigration in Washington, D.C. on Thursday, April 7, 2011. A delegation from the AILA New York Chapter would like to meet with you and your staff to discuss issues of mutual concern. Among other things, these include visa retrogression (green card unavailability), civil liberties and judicial review, the DREAM/Student Adjustment Act, the H-1B visa crisis, and other processing and enforcement issues relating to our immigration laws.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with you in your office on April 7 to discuss these issues. We will contact your office shortly to set up an appointment. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Michael Mandel & Stuart Reich  
Co-Chairs, Congressional Advocacy Committee