

SLDN First-Timer Tips

Making the Most of Your 15 Minutes of Lobbying Fame

1. Have a 15-Minute Action Plan

You have 15 minutes—on average—to speak with a Member of Congress or a staffer. So before you walk into the office, be sure you know the three talking points you will raise. Using this plan, you'll be sure to discuss your most important points before any possible interruption cuts the meeting short.

2. Speak Plainly (Without Acronyms)

Most grassroots lobbyists meet with staffers, not Members of Congress. Most staffers are in their early to mid-twenties, working in their first full-time job, and trying to understand as many as a dozen different issues. Whomever you meet with, chances are that person knows very little about Don't Ask, Don't Tell. So avoid using acronyms or jargon. The staffer and the Member may nod and grin at the right times, but may avoid showing their ignorance by asking you to define the acronym or term they don't understand.

3. Make a Connection

A few days before your meeting, do some research on the Member you will be meeting with. Did you grow up in the same hometown as the Member or staffer? Graduate from the same college? Noting similarities in your back-ground or any other areas of common interest can be a great conversation starter. This technique is an effective way to break down the natural barrier that can exist when meeting with someone for the first time. Just be sure to avoid using all of your time talking about Cousin Joe or your alma mater's basketball team.

4. Don't Do All the Talking

If the staffer or Member knows little about Don't Ask, Don't Tell, they usually are very happy to have you do all the talking. So be sure to occasionally ask questions—the kind that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer—to ensure your audience is receiving the message you are delivering.

5. Beware of Photo-Ops

If a Member of Congress knows you're going to ask a very difficult question, one that requires an answer you may not like, be ready for all types of delay tactics. Your representative or senator may want to talk about unrelated issues, or insist on getting a photo taken—a delay tactic that can consume almost all your time. Take the photo—but only AFTER you have delivered your message.

6. State Clearly What You Want the Member to Do

Many staffers and grassroots lobbyists can have an enjoyable visit, but at the end the Member or staffer is often left asking, “What exactly do they want us to do?” Remember what you are here to do, ask the Representative to cosponsor HR 1283, and to vote for the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. If you are meeting with your Senator, ask them to cosponsor the Senate companion bill to HR 1283 when it is introduced.

7. Appoint a Spokesperson

Are you traveling as part of a group? If so, decide before entering the office who in your group will do most of the talking. Everyone does not have to speak, and everyone *should* not speak. Remember, you only have a small amount of time. Appoint one individual as chief spokesperson. Does someone in your group have a compelling story? Make sure that person gets a chance to tell it. Others can help if the spokesperson cannot answer a particular question or can give other examples as to how Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell impacts people’s lives.

8. Know Your Talking Points

Three talking points to remember and stress when speaking to the Member or staffer:

Number one: Repealing Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell will strengthen our military.

Number two: Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell is unfair.

Number three: Repeal is non-controversial.

All of this information and more can be found in the *Servicemembers Legal Defense Network “A Guide to ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.’”*

8. Follow-Up for Success

To stand out from the dozens of grassroots and professional lobbyists who visit a congressional office in a typical week, be sure to follow up after your visit. Asking to meet with a Member or staffer again is just one way to extend the value of your visit. Email a thank-you letter to the staffer you meet with immediately after your visit. Were questions asked that required information not available during the visit? Include the requested information in the letter. If you took pictures, include them, too. You can send other information, fact sheets, and news clips throughout the year. The keys are communicating and delivering useful information. A single visit with a member of Congress or a staffer is only one small part of a good legislative campaign. You have an excellent opportunity to develop a closer, more significant relationship with the staffer or Member. Take advantage of the opportunity, understand the limits of your 15 minutes of fame, and be sure to stay in touch.