How to Make the Most Impactful Legislative Visits: Preparing for Your Meetings

We want you to have the most impactful legislative visits as possible, so here are a few tips to help you. Remember, we will also have staff available during the morning and the afternoon for you to do practice visits with.

First and foremost, there is no reason to be nervous when meeting with legislators. Remember, legislators work for you, you are their boss. Just as important, don’t be disappointed if you meet with a member of the legislator’s staff. The legislature might be in session or there may be a committee meeting at the time of your meeting, which is why you may not get to meet with the legislator themselves. Staff member play an important role as their jobs are to advise and steer the legislators, so it’s crucial that they hear the importance of our advocacy issues.

Since your legislative meetings are generally less than ten minutes, you want to ensure that you have time to make your advocacy visits as effective as possible. When meeting with your legislators or members of their staff you DO NOT WANT to read the action sheets verbatim, which is why we are providing you with talking points.

Below are some suggestions to ensure that your legislative meetings are as successful as possible: Remember, however, you are all advocacy specialists in your own right, so follow your own instincts if you think it would be most effective.

1-Know when to advocate and when to thank. It’s important to do a little homework before your meetings. You should know if the legislator you are meeting with already supports our issues. NAMI-NYS is making folders for each meeting we know about with notes on what to thank the legislator for. Review the notes before the meeting: be sure to thank them for their support and urge them to tell their colleagues to support these issues.

2-The smaller the group the better, as bringing too many people can get chaotic. Remember you only have a limited amount of time and you don’t want to waste that time by having to organize everybody and finding seats. More people also lead to longer introductions which again takes time away from our message. Ideally, you want no more than four to six people at a meeting. If you plan on having a large contingent from your affiliate attend, try to set up meetings with all the legislators who represent the area your affiliate is located in and break into teams to make multiple meetings. Remember not every affiliate member’s Assemblymember and Senator will be the same as another’s.

3-Assign a lead person and a time keeper in advance. The lead person should confirm the name of the staff person you are meeting with. Thank them for their time and exchange business cards so a follow up can take place. Hand them the legislative folder. Ask how much time you have for this meeting and do not go any longer than the allotted time. The lead person should ask if the staff member is familiar with NAMI; if not, be ready to give a brief summary of our
mission...ie: “NAMI is the largest family and consumer grassroots mental health advocacy organization in the country.” This should not take more than a minute.

4-Organize the presentation. The lead person should introduce himself/herself and allow everyone else around the table to introduce themselves (one person doing all the talking is boring). As you go around the table, each person should briefly say where they are from and (if they are comfortable with doing so) who is mentally ill in their family, what the diagnosis is, and how they are doing (ie: if they need housing, hospitalization, employment, better medications, etc.). This makes it personal and interesting.

Enclosed are the talking points for the issues we are advocating for. Decide in advance who will address each item and do not spend more than a minute on each.

When time is up, the lead person should ask the legislative representative if they have any questions.

5-Do not try to answer questions you do not know the answer to. If the person you are meeting with asks a question you that you cannot answer, don’t make up an answer. It’s okay to say, “Honestly, I do not know the answer to that, I will check with the NAMI-New York State office and get back to you on that.” Make sure to get the individual’s card and write the question down and give it to a NAMI-NYS staff person after the visit.

6-Offer our services. Also ask if there is anything we can do to help their member (this could be an opportunity to build a positive partnership). You can also mention any upcoming events (such as presentations and NAMIWalks) that you want to invite the legislator to. The lead person should then thank the staff person for his/her time (usually everybody shakes hands) and then everyone should leave as quickly and politely as possible since other groups are probably waiting to come in.

7-Follow up. After the meeting be sure to follow up with a thank-you letter addressing specific items discussed. Here is an example of a thank you letter:

Dear______.

Thank you again for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with me and my fellow members from NAMI______, to discuss issues important to us as people impacted by mental illness. Again I want express my appreciation to Senator/Assembly Member__________ for their support of (list issues they support).

Please do not hesitate to contact either me or NAMI-NYS at 518-462-2000 if you have additional questions about the legislation or issues we discussed. We look forward to working with you and Senator/Assembly Member__________ to create a mentally healthier New York.

(AT THE END OF THE MEETING YOU CAN ALSO ADD) We also have a NAMI______ event taking place on ____________ at ____________ and we would be honored to have Senator/Assemblymember__________ attend to say a few words.