



New York State

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 of Legislative Day 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. No one expects you to present yourselves as you are professional lobbyists. You are ADVOCATES and constituents with personal stories which speak to why our [Action Agenda](#) is so important.

Just as important as not being nervous about meeting with legislators, is not to 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- We have done your homework for you so you have information about your legislator.

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 or if they need to be educated on the issues.

NAMI-NYS will be making specific folders for each meeting we know is scheduled. These specialized folders will include notes on the legislator you will be meeting with. These notes include what we need to advocate and what we need to thank them for. We need to advocate if they are on a committee that needs to be targeted or they are not currently supporting one of our bills. We need to thank them if they already support our issues or legislation.

Before the meeting, the meeting captain (the role of the meeting captain is detailed in point # 3) should review the notes that will be clipped to the front of the folder, so they know how to tailor the message for that meeting. It's important that we thank those who support our issues and advocate for those issues with the ones who are not supporters. The team captains should also make sure they remove the "home work" sheet before giving the folder to the legislator or aide.

2-The smaller the group the better as bringing too many people can get chaotic. Remember you only have a limited amount of time for the meeting 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.

3-Assign a meeting captain and a time keeper in advance. The captain for each meeting will have the folder for the meeting. They should be responsible for reviewing the "home work" points that NAMI-NYS tailored for each meeting (referenced in point #1). At the beginning of the meeting the captain 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 blue legislative folder. Ask how much time you have for this meeting and do not go any longer than the allotted time.

The captain should ask if the staff member is familiar with NAMI; if not, be ready to give a brief summary of our mission...i.e.: *"NAMI is the largest family and consumer grassroots mental health advocacy organization in the country and we are from NAMI_____ one of the more than forty local affiliates in New York State."* This should not take more than a minute.

4-Organize the presentation. The captain 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 introduce themselves and briefly state A) Where they are from. B) (if they are comfortable with doing so) What their connection to mental illness is (state that they have a (child, sibling, parent, spouse, etc.) with a mental illness or that they have a mental illness (can state the diagnosis). C) How is the person with MI doing? (ie: if they need housing, hospitalization, employment, better medications, etc.) This makes it personal and interesting.

We have provided you with 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. If someone in the group has a specific connection to one of the issues, that person should discuss the issue and tell their story. This is important as it puts a face to the issue.

When time is up, the captain 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 their card and write the question down and give it to a NAMI-NYS staff person after the visit. You can also tell them that Matthew Shapiro in the NAMI-NYS office is the best person to answer your question and his business card is in your folder.

6-Offer our services. Also ask if there is anything *we* can do to help *them* or *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 attend. The captain should then thank the staff person for their 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 you (if you met the legislator) or Senator/Assembly Member _____ (if you met with staff) for their support of (list issues they support).

Please do not hesitate to contact either myself 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.

(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.