

How to Make the Most Impactful Legislative Visits

Preparing for Your Meetings

Many people find speaking to their legislators intimidating and this section is designed to help relieve the stress about advocacy meetings and provide tips to successful meetings.

Key things to remember which will demystify advocacy meetings:

- Legislators work for us, we are their boss, and they are accountable to us. So you shouldn't be intimidated by them.
- You are an advocate, not a lobbyist. You are only an expert in your own experience, so no one expects to be an expert on all these issues and know all the facts and figures. We will provide you with a folder with all the detailed information to give to whomever you are meeting with. We want you to use your story to explain these issues. We don't expect you to be a policy expert, so you should not expect that for yourself.
- Don't feel you need to answer every question. It's perfectly ok to say, "I'm sorry, but I don't know the answer to that question. I will relay your question to NAMI-NYS staff and have them follow-up with you."
- Don't play party politics. Do not assume because your representative is a member of a certain party that they do not care about our issues. Mental health is truly an issue that crosses party lines. We have had tremendous legislative champions on both sides of the aisle.
- Not everyone in the meeting needs to speak or tell their story, in fact in most cases you won't have time for everyone in a group to tell their stories. So you can be effective just by showing up and demonstrating that there are many people impacted by our issues.
- People are embarrassed if they don't know who their legislators are or how to schedule a meeting. That's ok, many people don't know who their state legislators are. NAMI-NYS can help you identify your legislators and schedule visits.

Tips for successful meetings:

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.

1-The smaller the group the better: 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, break into smaller groups and try to set up meetings with all the legislators who represent the area your affiliate is located in. Remember not every affiliate member's Assemblymember and Senator will be the same.

2-Plan ahead: Before your meetings your group should decide who is going to say what. Ideally in each meeting two people should tell their stories. Before your meeting, NAMI-NYS will provide you with a folder for the meeting with information on the legislator you are meeting with and what type of stories are needed to sway them on an issue. It is also important to remember that you may not get to every issue in every meeting. So predetermine what issues are priorities. Again, NAMI-NYS may explain what issues to focus on for particular meetings. It is also important to designate a lead person and a time keeper in advance.

3-Do not be disappointed if you do not meet with your representative themselves: We know that ideally you would like to meet with your representative, but often times it is actually more beneficial to meet with a legislative director or staff person as they are the ones who shape the policies that the legislator supports. It is vital that we educate these decision makers on why these issues are important. It also important to remember that while legislators change, the professional legislative staff remains after a legislator leaves Albany and many staffers go on to work for different legislators. So by influencing a staffer today can actually impact several legislators.

4- Know when to advocate and when to thank. It's important to do a little homework before your meetings. Again NAMI-NYS will provide you with a folder with information on your legislator. It will tell you if they already support the issues NAMI-NYS is advocating for. If they are a supporter, be sure to thank them. If they are not supporting one of our issues, you need to explain why it is important to you as their constituent. It is also important to know if a bill has passed the branch of the legislator you are meeting with.

5-Tell your story: When meeting with your legislators or members of their staff you DO NOT WANT to read the action sheets verbatim. Here is how a successful meeting should flow:

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 **and hand them a folder.**

The lead person should then make a quick introduction such as: My name is John Smith, I live in Albany and I here because (state relationship to mental illness or NAMI). I am a member of NAMI Capital Region, part of America's largest grassroots mental health organization, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. With me today is:

All the other group members will introduce themselves, say where they live and state the relationship.

After everyone has introduced themselves, the lead person will take over and transition to the action agenda:

“We’re here today to discuss the NAMI-NYS Action Agenda to create a more mentally healthy New York State. Our main issues are:

Access to proper treatment as too many people are not receiving the services and medication they need to advance their recovery. We are very grateful for all your support on the insurance parity issues as that is a main barrier to care. Another insurance issue we’re concerned about is the practice of non-medical switching, essentially when a provider switches what medication

they cover during a contract year. Which is why we support bill #_____ which would regulate this practice.

Community Services, which begin with a strong mental health workforce. We are disappointed that the Governor's budget did not include a 2.9% COLA for the mental health workforce.

Mental Health housing, Laura is going to explain how mental health housing helped her and her family.

Laura would then tell her story.

The lead person continues: "One other priority we want to bring to your attention is the need to make criminal justice reforms. Unfortunately, Charles' family's story will explain why this is so important."

Charles tells his story.

The lead person continues:

"Our other priorities include enacting Extreme Risk Protection Orders and expanding the Joseph P Dwyer veterans' peer-to-peer program. All of which are detailed in your packet."

6-Do not try to answer questions you do not know the answer to. We mentioned this before, but we cannot emphasize this point enough. 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.

7-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 let them know of community events coming up (such as a NAMI Walk) where they can come speak to your membership. The lead person 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.

8-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 his/her support of (list bills they support) and we urge him/her to support (list bills we are looking to have them 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.