



Preparing for Your Legislative Meetings During the 2021 Session

Many people find arranging meetings with and speaking to their legislators intimidating under normal conditions and having to conduct these meetings via Zoom this session may increase those anxieties. This resource 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 packet with detailed information to email to your legislator. 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." The packet emailed to them will also have NAMI-NYS contact information.
- **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.
- **NAMI-NYS can help you find your legislator**. 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, especially this year when there are many newly elected. NAMI-NYS can help you identify your legislators and schedule visits. The following information will also help you feel more comfortable as you prepare for your meetings. There will also be a team leader and a representative from NAMI-NYS for all meetings to help you.

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, even on Zoom. More people also lead to longer introductions which takes time away from our message. Ideally, you want no more than four to six people at a meeting.

2-Plan ahead: Planning ahead is more important as we do these meetings on Zoom. It is crucial that the meeting leader knows all the contact information for the meeting participants and it should be decided in advance who is going to say what during the meeting. Ideally in each meeting two people should tell their stories.

Before your meeting, NAMI-NYS will provide the team leader 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 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 the meeting leader 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-Make the meeting conversational and 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 meeting leader person should confirm the name of the staff person you are meeting with and thank them for their time. 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: (The group should give the first name of a participant and then have that person quickly introduce themselves saying where they live and state the relationship to mental health. After everyone has introduced themselves, the lead person will take over and transition to the action agenda by using the introduction section of the [“talking points” document](#).

Again, the meeting leader or NAMI-NYS representative should know in advance what stories we want to tell in the specific meeting and who is going to tell it. So for example, if a participant has a story demonstrating the benefit of telehealth services when we get to the issue the leader would say, “We are asking you to support Governor Cuomo’s initiative to expand telehealth services. Jane will know explain how these services helped her maintain her mental health” Jane would then tell her story.

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 where they can come speak to your membership. Also let them know that you and the affiliate would be happy to help collaborate with them on a community mental health form.

The lead person should then thank the legislator or their staff person for their time and again let them know that NAMI-NYS’s contact info is in their packet and also provide them with your email and the affiliate contact (also put it in the chat box). Get theirs as well.

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 Matthew Shapiro at NAMI-NYS at Matthew@naminys.org. 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.

Another important part of following-up post meetings is providing Matthew Shapiro at NAMI-NYS with the contact information of the staff you are met with.