

# ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

*It is essential for health center advocates to build and maintain relationships with elected officials who can support community health center and the patients they serve, and though some of them may seem unapproachable or intimidating, developing a relationship with policymakers is no different than getting to know a new friend or contact.*

*Here are ways to build a valuable relationship with an elected official:*

**ACCESS:** Attend events that you know your elected official will attend like Town Hall meetings, community planning meetings, or campaign events. Step up and introduce yourself, say where you are from and what you do. If true, SAY YOU ARE A CONSTITUENT. Invite them to come to your health center.

**SUPPORT YOUR OFFICIAL:** Seek areas of common ground and ALWAYS be respectful when you speak with an elected official. NEVER speak about them poorly, in private conversations or in public. Recognize NEW elected officials with a letter of congratulations sent to them or in a Letter to the Editor to your local newspaper, and express your desire to work together in the future.

**ASK QUESTIONS:** Learn about your official. Get to know your policymakers point of view by researching and asking them about their life before they took office. Do they sit on community boards or volunteer in the community? What are their interests?

**RESPECT OPPOSING VIEWS:** Always know your elected official's views on the issues and if you're not sure, ask them what they think. Understanding the views and stances of your official will help you tailor your conversation and enable a smooth working relationship.

**BE APPROACHABLE:** It's all about developing trust —building a relationship with an elected official and his or her staff members is no different than building relationships with friends or associates.

**BE A RESOURCE:** First and foremost, elected officials want to represent constituents in their district or state, so show how your issue connects with them. Educate your official —don't assume they know who you are or what you are talking about. Show your elected official how you can help inform his constituents through your network.

**BE DIRECT:** Ask your elected official for support; when appropriate, tell them exactly what action you would like to see from them.

## TOP TEN WAYS TO MAINTAIN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH AN ELECTED OFFICIAL

1. Invite your elected officials to visit your health center. Make sure they know what your health center does for the community and its challenges. Suggest what they can do to improve or help health centers.
2. Follow up with your elected officials. Update them on the results of their support and news about activity at the health center.
3. Put elected officials on your health center's newsletter mailing list.
4. When they have been supportive, thank them quickly and publicly. Publicize their support for health centers by submitting a Letter to the Editor to your local paper.
5. Provide regular communication via email and phone calls as a concrete reminder of your interest, your identity, and your issues.
6. Share your annual report, news about new board members, and special events.
7. Invite elected officials to your health center at least once a year and for special events.
8. Make a lasting impression by being reliable and sincere.
9. Get to know their administrative staff. Talk with key aides, schedulers and front desk staff with courtesy and appreciation.
10. Remember that maintaining a relationship is a two-way street. Just as you ask your elected official to support you and health centers, provide data and information in a timely manner as requested from your elected official and their staff.

## GET TO KNOW CONGRESSIONAL STAFF

Building a good working relationship with congressional staff is as important as developing a relationship with your senator or representative. It's easier to reach and speak with staff. **Staff members play a key role in helping legislators reach decisions.**

Staff people may know a lot, or nothing, about health center issues. If the legislator sits on a key committee responsible for health care, they or someone on their staff is likely to focus on health care. **Get to know the staff member responsible for health care related bills, policies, and legislation.** This will be especially useful if you plan on communicating frequently.

The level of expertise also may vary, depending on where the staff person works — in Washington, D.C., or in one of the district offices. **District office staffers should be included in your outreach.** They are the eyes and ears for the legislator on how issues are playing back home.