



PUBLICCITIZEN

Citizen Lobbying Guide

Public Citizen's Access to
Medicines Program

2018



What are congressional visits?

The answer is in the name – congressional visits are your opportunity to visit your congressperson’s office and meet with your representative, senators, or their staffer(s). When you conduct a congressional visit, you use your voice and power as constituents to influence policies, positions, and programs of elected officials. A major goal of most congressional visits is to draw attention to an issue and to direct those officials who serve your districts towards a solution you present. When you hold a congressional visit about prescription drug pricing, you draw attention to the negative effects of pharmaceutical monopolies on access to life-saving medications. You share your story, as a voter and member of the community, along with an “ask” or call to action.

Why do congressional visits?

It is morally wrong that in the richest country in the world, people are denied access to the medicines they need because they cannot afford them, as is the case for millions of Americans today. Americans support, by wide margins and across party lines, strong action to reduce medicine prices and end the monopoly abuses of prescription drug corporations. It is time for elected leaders to unite behind a real priority for Americans – lowering prescription drug prices.

Becoming an activist is one of the most powerful ways to support Public Citizen and the movement for affordable medicines.

As a constituent and informed citizen, you have the power to enact measurable change in policy for access to medicines initiatives. Pharmaceutical corporations spend more than 100 million dollars annually on lobbying to increase their profits while price gouging American consumers. However, elected leaders don’t work for the corporations, they work for you. Members of Congress are key decision-makers in many of the choices that affect the everyday lives of people all over the country. It is critical that we, as constituents, take our message to our elected officials to show that despite the power of prescription drug corporations, the people will not be silenced.

Congressional visits are an opportunity to persuade your representatives to support vital legislation, and they will also serve as an educational tool for you and your community; you will learn about important political processes and become a better informed and more active citizen. When communities come together to deliver a unified, timely message to members of Congress, those communities act as an effective force for change.

Through collective action, we will harness the power of our communities to influence the people, policies, and programs that can lower medicine prices and expand access to prescription drugs. Will you step up and build a relationship with your elected officials?

Why do congressional visits now?

Prescription drug prices are a leading driver of healthcare costs, and President Trump has repeatedly stated that he's committed to lowering the price of medicines. Yet, leaked documents that hint at the administration's approach indicate that they may actually work to increase prices, both domestically and abroad. Additionally, the House and Senate Republicans' health care repeal plans would have eliminated requirements for insurance companies to provide prescription drug coverage and other basic healthcare necessities at a time when Americans demand greater access to affordable medicines. There is strong evidence that voters want reform in this area –

- The majority of Americans (61%) say lowering the cost of prescription drugs should be a “top priority” for Congress and the Trump administration ([Kaiser Poll, Healthcare Priorities for 2017](#))
- 77% of Americans say prescription drug costs are unreasonable ([Kaiser 2016 Poll](#))
- 86% of Americans favor requiring drug companies to release information to the public on how they set drug prices ([Kaiser 2016 Poll](#))
- 92% of Americans favor allowing the federal government to negotiate with drug companies to get a lower price on medications for people on Medicare ([Kaiser 2017 Poll](#))
- 75% of Americans favor shortening the length of monopoly granted on prescription drugs so that cheaper generic drugs are made available sooner ([Lake Research Partners Poll](#))

We need to visit our members of Congress now in order to:

1. **Influence sponsorship and voting for the Medicare Negotiation and Competitive Licensing Act (H.R. 6505).** The Medicare Negotiation and Competitive Licensing Act was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives on July 25th. The bill would allow the government to negotiate lower prescription drug prices through Medicare Part D, and when pharmaceutical corporations fail to agree to a reasonable price, it would allow the government to use a competitive license and accelerated approval to introduce a generic medicine that will help drive down prices.
Find out who is cosponsoring at: <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/115/hr6505>
2. **Start building relationships with Congress** so that we can mount escalating pressure on them leading up to the next legislative session, which starts in early 2019. Showing up to an office once isn't necessarily effective – we need to show Congress that we are here to stay, and to work with them for the long haul. Starting now to build relationships with your congressional office means being able to have more substantive and influential meetings in the future.
3. **Train yourself for the resistance.** If you're feeling nervous about having your first meeting, all the more reason *not* to put it off! Waiting longer means more time spent being nervous; going *now* means becoming an expert sooner! By having a meeting, you're taking a first step towards contributing to a national narrative that fits your values, and that is extremely important for our democracy.

How to schedule a congressional visit

Step one: Decide what congressperson you'd like to meet with

You have two senators and one representative. Do some research to find out who they are and their political history and priorities. Look up what committees they sit on, and what their voting history has been on relevant issues. These sites may be helpful in your research:

<https://www.govtrack.us/>, <http://www.ontheissues.org/default.htm>, <https://votesmart.org/>, http://ballotpedia.org/Main_Page, but also simply “Googling” your congressperson with “prescription drug prices” is a good place to start.

Step two: Decide when you'd like to meet with your congressperson

Varying current events will factor into the timeline of legislative processes. You should also do research or reach out to Public Citizen’s Access to Medicines team (medsaccess@citizen.org) to find out when important hearings or votes are occurring.

Once you understand the campaign timeline, decide on a strategic time when you can turn out a strong showing. Though only one person is *required* for a meeting, more people means you feel more supported and your message is heard louder (it’s also more fun!). Talk with your peers to find a variety of dates that might work, and consider inviting other allied organizations/persons that support the work of Public Citizen.

If you are trying to meet with the legislator themselves in-district, make sure to ask for a meeting while they are on recess – otherwise they will be in DC. You can find the recess calendars for the House and Senate online (on the www.house.gov and www.senate.gov websites), and call to ask the office when your representative will be in their local office or holding town halls.

Step three: Set up a meeting with your congressperson

1. **Call your congressperson’s office to schedule a meeting.** Make sure that you are calling their local district office – find the one nearest you on their website! The main line listed may be for their office in Washington, D.C., so unless you’re planning a trip, double check.
 - a. Check the House and Senate websites to see when Congress is in Washington, D.C. and when members are at home (www.house.gov, www.senate.gov)
 - b. When they’re home, you’re more likely to meet your actual elected official, or higher-ranking staff.
2. It is relatively unlikely that you will be able to get a meeting with your senators themselves, and representatives (while more reachable) can also be hard to nail down, especially if they are prominent or have been getting a lot of press lately. This is okay! If they are unable to meet with you, you can have an effective meeting with their staff. If all else fails, you can ask to conference in a staffer from the D.C. office (on the phone) who works specifically on health legislation.

3. You may be asked to email a scheduler. If so, make sure to follow up by phone regularly until the meeting is scheduled!
4. When you email the scheduler or staffer, mention who you are and that you are a constituent, who you represent (if you're in a coalition or if you have a big team of folks), who will be attending the meeting (e.g. 4 constituents and 2 patients who cannot access affordable insulin), and what issue(s) you'd like to discuss.

**Near the date of the meeting, call or email to confirm the date and time.

How to prepare for a congressional visit

1. **Do some basic research on the senator or representative whose office you are visiting.** Knowing about issues and populations that are important to them will help you tailor your message to their interests. What's a starting point? Check if your senator or representative is already a cosponsor of the Affordable Meds Act or any other relevant legislation. Public Citizen keeps a list of drug pricing legislation that we support [here](#) as a starting point.

If you are scheduled to meet with a staffer, consider doing some research into their role within the office. The questions you receive in the meeting, and their familiarity with the issue could change based on whether you meet with someone who has more knowledge about the issue of drug pricing (i.e. Chief of Staff or Health Legislative Aide) or someone who is less familiar with the specifics of the topic (i.e. Legislative Correspondent or Constituent Outreach Coordinator).

2. **Decide who is attending the meeting.** Get firm commitments from constituents and any other allied organization's members who are interested in attending. If at all possible, try to have a delegation of constituents who vote in the district.
If you are not from within the district, you are not required to divulge this information, but do not lie if asked, and be honest about why you still feel compelled to meet with the office.
3. **Set an agenda.** During your meeting, you'll want to address a number of key points and keep it timely. You should assume that the meeting will last approximately 30 minutes, unless you are informed otherwise. Further, you should have at least one clear "ask" for the elected official or staffer, and he or she will need time to respond or gather the necessary information in order to follow up with you. See the following pages for a sample agenda and use it as a template.
4. **Assign speaking roles.** Everyone in the meeting should introduce themselves at the beginning. Knowing who is speaking, what they are covering, and in what order will make the entire process smoother, and you will feel more confident. Many staffers meet constituents who don't plan well; being prepared will make you and your issues stand out.

Also assign at least one person to **take detailed notes** in order to report back to Public Citizen and our growing network of local activists, and to debrief and follow up after the visit.

5. **Practice!** Once you've assigned speaking roles, run a mock visit. Have each person practice their piece of the meeting – even introductions! – and make sure they are clear, articulate, and within reasonable time constraints. This will help you feel and sound more confident on the day of the visit. It may seem silly, but *don't skip this* step, especially if it's your first time.

Arrive early, and when you arrive at the office you should take a few moments to review your roles in the meeting. We want to try to avoid surprises and be conscious of how everyone is feeling about their role before you go in.

6. **Print your leave-behinds.** Public Citizen will provide [basic material](#) for you to leave with your elected official or their staffer that includes our key message. Pass this material out to the legislator and/or staffer(s) in your meeting, and reference it while you present the issue. It's always smart to have extra copies just in case! You'll also be emailing copies of the materials after, but staffers are more likely to remember them if they are provided and discussed during the meeting as well.
7. **Breathe!** It's normal to feel a little nervous, especially before your first visit. But if you've prepared well, practiced your part, printed your materials, and have a strong delegation, you'll be ready to go.

At the meeting

1. **Be confident.** You are the expert on the issues you're bringing up and, if you are a constituent, you are their boss! Don't worry if you are nervous; it is their job to meet with you and listen to your concerns!

If you are asked a question you are unprepared to answer, simply let them know that you will do additional research and get back to them – and then do that! It's okay not to know everything, and we're happy to help – send us a message to ask for assistance finding those answers: medsaccess@citizen.org.

2. **Make sure to maintain a reasonable talk/listen ratio.** You want to showcase your knowledge of the issue and thoroughly explain its implications on both a local and national level. That being said, you want to allow the legislator or staff to explain where they stand exactly and be able to ask any questions or voice any concerns. Think of the meeting less as a presentation or lecture and more as an organized conversation. Try to have your group only use about 50% of your given time.
3. **Take notes.** Without detailed notes, you won't have the necessary material to properly follow up and report back. Record the tone of the meeting, any questions or concerns, and any commitments made by the legislator, staffer, or your team. You will also want to record any special notes they have on upcoming legislation or pieces that you might not have known about.
4. **Collect business cards** of the staffer(s) with whom you're meeting. You want to have the contact information for anyone in the room, so you can follow up and reach out in future conversations.
5. **Make a plan to follow up** through email, phone, or another in-person meeting. Make sure you get a timeline with any follow-up or action they've committed to, and/or a plan for when you might reach out.
6. **Take a picture!** If you had a meeting with a staffer but the congressperson is around in the office (on recess from DC), ask if they can step out for a moment to take a picture with you/your group. While you get situated for a photo, this is a great time to make a quick introduction and slip in your firm ask to the legislator themselves.

After the meeting – Follow Up!

1. **Follow up** with the legislator and/or their staffer(s). This is very important! Without follow-up, your efforts are for naught. Assign someone on your team to lead the follow-up process.

In a short email afterwards, thank them for meeting with you. If they later follow through with a commitment they made during the meeting, thank them again. If they had a question you couldn't answer, do some research and then get back to them. Keep up with them often to see if they've followed through with their commitments, and provide pressure and guidance as needed. If they tell you they want to hear more constituent voices – gather petition signatures and reply.

Your first meeting is just the beginning. Most of your work will be done through follow-up: emails, further meetings, calls, actions, and escalating pressure to remind them that we are here for the long haul, and that we will keep them accountable and give credit where credit is due.

2. **Report back** to your team of people! **Share information from your meeting** so that you can keep track of all your communications and headway throughout the community. Without knowing what everyone has done, you can't plan for the next step in this campaign! Let other groups in your area know how the visit went, including us at medsaccess@citizen.org.

Tips for getting email read:

1. **Be Timely** – send an email to set up a meeting a week or two out at most. It’s tempting to think of the meeting as an event to plan a month ahead, but to staff a closer date is easier to manage.
2. **Include Relevant Data**- Staff scan the email looking for little pieces of data that are important to them. Is the main point of your meeting to talk about Medicare Part D price negotiations? Say so, and also illustrate the importance of seniors’ access to affordable medication with a fact or two (like Medicare beneficiaries spend \$1 out of every \$5 in out-of-pocket costs on prescription drugs).
3. **Work on the subject line** - The subject line should be short and sweet. Make it 6 words or less and right to the point. A Pro tip for this one: try to work in the word “invitation.” Staffers often think there might be an offer for food in the email and are more likely to open it (no, you don’t have to *actually* give them food).
4. **Keep it Short** – Take the time to craft a very short email. If you have to scroll more than twice, it’s too long. Most staff will read your email on a cell phone, so keep that in mind. But try not to sweat the details too much. Mark Twain once said, “I would have written you a shorter letter, but I didn’t have the time.”
5. **Always include links** – Link to relevant articles on the topic. You want links to your briefs and/or your leave-behind document so that the staffer can put this all into a briefing packet later.
6. **Don’t send attachments** – Attachments can make it more likely for an email to get flagged as spam. If it’s not flagged as spam, many times attachments are not opened for one reason or another. If *you have* to send an attachment (say a leave-behind after a meeting) make sure it is a PDF, not a word document.
7. **If you don’t get a response** – Reply to your own message with a brief note: “I just wanted to be sure you saw this message, I would like to schedule a meeting with your office next Wednesday or Thursday to talk about prescription drug pricing legislation.” **And call the office!** You can leave a voicemail or continue to call every few days until you reach your contact. Your persistence will pay off!

Sample Agenda

By setting an agenda before the meeting, you (and your group) will be better prepared for the meeting, come off as more professional, and have more success getting your point across. Below we've written a sample agenda that can be used for a first-time in-district meeting. Assign everyone who is attending a role within the agenda, and make sure to also assign a note taker and someone to keep the conversation on topic.

1. Introductions

Everyone at the meeting should get the chance to introduce themselves and why they care about these issues.

2. Acknowledgements

Take a moment to acknowledge your representative or senator for any previous action or support for legislation on relevant issues. If they have been a champion for access to medicines in the past, let them know that you appreciate it – and look forward to their critical ongoing support! Even legislators are people; everyone likes to feel appreciated and needed.

If you are meeting with a staffer, you can let them know you appreciate their boss and their offices' work on this issue. If you know that particular staffer was important in previous efforts, you can of course thank them personally as well.

3. Present the issues

This is your chance to discuss the issues for which you are there to gain support. Keep things clear and concise. Use personal anecdotes and/or stories; storytelling can be a very powerful tool to show the importance of your request. This is a perfect time to reference your leave-behind material.

4. Making the ask

Make a clear, targeted request for them to take some sort of action. Ask for their answer immediately. Examples of relevant asks include “Will you cosponsor the Affordable Meds Act?”, “Will you sponsor another piece of legislation to address drug pricing?” or “Will you come out in public support of reducing the harmful effects of PhRMA monopoly power on drug prices?” If they are unwilling to make a commitment, set a date to follow up. And don't forget to record questions, objections, promises, or concerns.

Pro Tip: *If you cannot get any kind of commitment or follow-up steps that are concrete and time-bound – ask: “Do you have enough information to recommend to your boss that they cosponsor this bill?” If they say no, ask what would be helpful.*

5. Plan for follow-up

During the meeting, make a plan for how you will follow up on any commitments made from either side.