

# Talking to your Elected Representatives (Lobbying)

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Maybe you've heard that the only people who lobby are paid by big corporations, or that lawmakers don't care what a "kid" has to say. Maybe you think you'd say the wrong thing if you tried to talk to your elected officials. These are myths. As a young person who really cares, you are the most powerful kind of lobbyist there is. The following information covers all the basics of effective lobbying. Don't feel overwhelmed. Just remember, talking to your public officials is one of the most basic rights of a democratic society!

## Lobby Strategically

The first and most important point is that lobbying should be part of a strategically planned campaign. Sometimes you will use lobbying as a way to simply find out where your elected officials stand on the issue you are campaigning on. Other times you may lobby after generating public support for your issue; you visit to see if your elected official has gotten the point. Ideally you'll lobby more than once on an issue – so that the official comes to see you as an authority on that issue.

## What does lobbying accomplish?

- Informs activists and their organizations of the public official's position on the issue at hand;
- Informs public officials of their constituents' positions;
- Builds a relationship between the organization and the official (or their legislative assistant (LA));
- Persuades the public official to act the "right" way;
- Builds clout for your organization;
- Moves your campaign along.

## Legislative Assistants (LAs)

You most likely won't actually meet with your elected official. You'll meet with his/her LA who focuses on environmental issues.

It's important to understand the LA's perspective. They:

- Don't necessarily know about your issue;
- Get lots of lobby visits;
- Are super busy;

- May have views distinct from that of the public official;
- May be cocky (personally or for their public official);
- May have multiple issues they are responsible for (e.g. environment, health care, etc.).

## **Before you visit your public official:**

- **Make an appointment** with the LA who deals with the environment. Call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121. From there you can get the telephone number of your Senator or Representative. Remember, you don't need to go to DC to lobby. You can make an appointment to see your lawmaker at home. Make sure to ask where the office is so that you can find it when it comes time for your appointment.
- **Check your official's background.** You may want to look at his or her voting record, or search for articles about that person.
- **Check with your allies.** You might call your local Sierra Club group or chapter. Check with the Sierra Student Coalition campaign coordinators. There might be another environmental organization working on the same issue.
- **Organize a group** of two to four (no more and no fewer!) people to make the lobby visit.
- **Prepare what you want to say** and who will say it. See below for elements of your lobby talk.
- **Practice!**
- **Bring materials**
  - Pictures
  - Highlight important points
  - A camera
  - Letters from their constituency in support of your issue.
- Dress up (but also be yourself).
- Wear a button for your cause.
- **Get there early!**

## **What you have to say**

- Introduce yourself and your organization.
- Always mention that you are from the official's district. "I'm from Albuquerque and I go to Cibola High School."
- Introduce what you want to talk about.
- Ask if the official or LA is familiar with the issue and/or what his or her position is. This will allow you to tailor your statement to that particular person.
- If they get off topic or go on too long, INTERRUPT! This is your time and you need to make your points.
- Tell the story (your argument).
- You might talk about a personal experience related to the issue. For example if you want to talk about Wild Utah, mention the trip you have taken there.
- Facts are important, but don't overload. Two or three are enough. Just make sure you are prepared to answer questions.
- Be clear about what the immediate threat is.

- Know the bill number (both for bills you do and don't want them to vote for).
- Be very clear about what you want them to do.
- Assign one person to ask for what you want, DIRECTLY. "Will the senator cosponsor the Arctic Bill?"
- Make them say "NO" twice. For example, you might ask, "Will the senator cosponsor the Arctic Bill?" and "Will you encourage the senator to cosponsor the bill?"
- Restate your argument as a closing.
- Discuss the next step. Ask if you can call back in a week to see what progress has been made.
- Ask for a picture with you and the Senator/Representative. You can get this printed in your local paper.
- Ask for their card so that you can contact them again.
- DO NOT LIE. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, and offer to find out for them later.

## Follow-Up

- Write down what you have learned from your meeting as soon as you leave.
- Send a thank-you note.
- Remind the LA what you have agreed upon.
- Report what you've learned to other organizations working on the issue.
- Build community support and express that support through lobbying until you get what you want!