



# NATIONAL RURAL HOUSING COALITION

## ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

### MAKE THE MOST OF CONGRESS' TIME AT HOME

*BUILD A MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP  
WITH YOUR SENATORS AND REPRESENTATIVES*

#### **In this advocacy toolkit, you will learn:**

- ◆ Why in-district advocacy is critical to your success;
- ◆ Strategies to jump start the process of building a relationship with your Senators and Representatives at home:
  - ◇ Invite Senators and Representatives to visit your organization to learn more about the work that you do and how you can help them serve their district;
  - ◇ Meet with your Senators and Representatives one-on-one; and
  - ◇ Partner with local organizations to host a town hall meeting.

# INTRODUCTION

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## *IN-DISTRICT ADVOCACY IS CRITICAL TO YOUR SUCCESS.*

When it comes to influencing Congress, the most successful advocates are those who have made a conscious decision to build and sustain strong personal relationships with their Senators and Representatives. That process works best when it starts at home. By taking advantage of the times when your Senators and Representatives are at home, you can create in-district opportunities to strengthen your relationships with them.

Senators and Representatives are often in their districts every Friday through Monday, and for several weeks during the year, including the month of August. While the August Congressional Recess is typically the longest each year at five weeks, this year, due to the Presidential election, your members of Congress will be spending even more time in their home districts. When they return to Washington, D.C. in September, Senators and Representatives will focus on appropriations for FY 2017, which is expected to involve a Continuing Resolution through November.

Now is a great time to start engaging your Senators and Representatives or to continue to build on existing relationships. We encourage each of you to reach out to your Member of Congress' District office and show your Senators and Representatives the essential and positive role your organization has on improving the quality of affordable housing in rural communities.

In this toolkit, you will find three actions that can jumpstart the process of building a relationship with your Senators and Representatives at home. Those activities are:

- ◆ **Invite your Senators and Representatives to visit a project** and learn why the work that your organization does is important to their district, and how that work is supported by important federal programs;
- ◆ **Meet with your Senators and Representatives one-on-one** at a district office; and
- ◆ **Partner with other local organizations** to host a town hall meeting and inviting your Senators and Representatives to discuss the issues.

While these actions are not the only ways to engage your Senators and Representatives at home, they do make up the core components of creating a meaningful advocacy relationship built upon a foundation of familiarity, trust and knowledge. We hope these ideas will inspire you to use Congress's time at home as a tool for forming or improving a personal relationship with your Senators and Representatives. Doing so will not only increase your power and influence on Capitol Hill, but also help ensure that our voice carries the strength that it needs to be heard on the issues that matter most.

Thank you for your advocacy,

Robert A. Rapoza  
Rapoza Associates

# INVITE YOUR SENATORS AND REPRESENTATIVES TO VISIT YOUR ORGANIZATION

## *HOUSING IS VISUAL—LET MEMBERS OF CONGRESS SEE WHAT YOU DO!*

Having a politician make an on-site visit to your organization is one of the most powerful things you can do to build a relationship and advocate for your issues. By showing your Senators and Representatives first-hand the work that you do, how you serve your community, and how federal programs support your efforts, you can make a lasting impression. This is your opportunity to shine.

### SHOWCASE YOUR ORGANIZATION

- ◆ Always try to organize your event in such a way that your Senators and Representatives can speak to, and meet with, a significant number of constituents.
- ◆ Some ideas include inviting your Senators and Representatives to:
  - ◇ Meet your staff and members of the community that you serve;
  - ◇ Celebrate your organization's successes at a ceremony and say a few words in support of your organization; or
  - ◇ Receive an award from your organization for the good work that they have done in support of your cause.
- ◆ Personalize the experience by inviting a constituent who can share a personal story of how your organization impacted their life. Individual clients or local government leaders can put a human face on the work you do. The impact of the work that you do is so visual—safe and affordable housing for rural Americans. Let your Members of Congress see it!
- ◆ Connect the Dots. You are not only showcasing your organization, but the federal programs that support your work. This can help turn your Representative or Senator into a champion for the federal programs you rely on.

### HOW TO PREPARE

- ◆ Do your research. Does your Representative or Senator respond strongly to economic growth? Discuss how housing and community development programs foster job creation and economic growth, in addition to safe housing. If your Representative or Senator is a member of a Committee that focuses on a special group, such as veterans, try to showcase a project or development involving that special community.
- ◆ Invite your Senators and Representatives as far in advance as possible.
- ◆ Make your invitation stand out. Members of Congress get many invites every day, be sure to let them know that you are flexible and willing to accommodate the Members' schedule.
- ◆ Most Congressional schedulers prefer invitations to be sent via e-mail or fax. Be prepared to send your request through either, or both, of these mediums.
- ◆ Maximize the value of the visit by inviting media to attend the event. Make sure the Member knows about the media's involvement in advance.
- ◆ During the visit, volunteer your organization to serve as a resource for their offices. *Let them know that they can refer constituents to you when they need the services that your organization provides, and that you can be a resource to Congressional staff.*

### THINGS TO REMEMBER AFTER THE VISIT

- ◆ Send thank you letters to your Senator or Representative and be sure to include any press releases, news articles, and photos from the event.
- ◆ Make sure that you provide the name, email address, and direct phone number of a person in your organization to serve as a constituent services liaison for the Congressional office.

# MEET ONE-ON-ONE WITH YOUR REPRESENTATIVES AND SENATORS

## *KEEP RURAL HOUSING NEEDS ON THEIR MINDS*

A one-on-one meeting with your Senators and Representatives, or their staff, to discuss the issues facing rural communities carries much more weight than signing a petition, sending a letter, or making a phone call. Make your visit a success by following these pointers:

### PREPARING FOR THE MEETING

- ◆ Know the politician. Find out their background, information on the committees they're on, and other positions they hold that might be relevant. This information helps draw a direct link between the Senator or Representative and your advocacy efforts.
- ◆ Focus on one issue. You won't have time to deal with more than one issue well at the meeting; every additional issue that you raise will be less important to the representative or their staff.
- ◆ Know the issue. If you don't already know, learn the facts, figures, arguments, and counter-arguments surrounding the issue before your meeting. Knowledge is the cornerstone of advocacy.
- ◆ Make it personal. Sharing a real-life example of how your organization has impacted their district will put a human face on the work you do.
- ◆ Call us. We are here to help our members successfully frame the issues and understand them inside out. Our office can offer talking points, issue briefs, research, and specific information about the Senators and Representatives that you are going to meet.

### AT THE MEETING

- ◆ Don't skip the preliminaries. Introduce everyone present and their organizations. Thank the politician for the opportunity to meet. Confirm how much time you have and respect those limits.
- ◆ Designate one person as the lead speaker. Cutting down on the number of people talking shows consensus, allows the Senator and Representative, and their staff, to focus on the message, and reduces the chances of getting sidetracked.
- ◆ Listen. Finding out their views is just as important as conveying yours. Ask genuine questions and respect their answers. They often contain valuable information.
- ◆ Be clear and ask for what you want. Don't walk away from a Congressional meeting without asking your Senators and Representatives to take the specific action that you want them to take.
- ◆ End with thank you. Regardless of the outcome, thank your Senators and Representatives for the opportunity to meet and raise your concerns. Don't forget to thank their staff as well.

### AFTER THE MEETING

- ◆ Follow up. Send your Senators and Representatives a formal thank you, forward any additional information, and create a written confirmation of any agreed-to actions.

# PARTNER WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

## *HOST A TOWN HALL MEETING ON RURAL HOUSING*

Town hall meetings are an important tool for getting the attention of federal lawmakers, informing your neighbors about the issues, garnering media attention, and demonstrating the strength of a community's stance on a particular matter. Host your own town hall meeting with a Senator or Representative by taking the following steps:

### **PLANNING STAGE: FORM A PLANNING COMMITTEE WITH OTHER LOCAL AND STATE GROUPS**

- ◆ The more local and state partners you work with, the better your chances of getting your Senators and Representatives to attend.
  - ◇ Nothing creates a more powerful incentive than having your event supported by a broad (and large) swath of voters. Remember that constituents always matter!
  - ◇ Invite your Board of Directors, clients, staff, and others who are committed to the work you do and who can share a personal story of how your organization has impacted their life.
- ◆ For a successful town hall meeting, you should allow yourself a two-month period of planning to organize, schedule the attendance of your Senators and Representatives as speakers, and obtain sufficient media coverage.
- ◆ Use social media to advertise the town hall and increase community participation.
- ◆ Call us and let us help you lay the groundwork.
  - ◇ There are other organizations across the nation who share your passion about strengthening local communities. We can help you find like-minded organizations in your area to partner with and help your planning committee organize the event.

### **EXECUTION STAGE**

- ◆ Provide each speaker with a specific time limit. Assign volunteers to time the speeches and hold up the time prompt cards.
- ◆ Thank everyone for coming. Always have attendees fill out a sign-in sheet with their name, phone number, address, and email address. Contact information will help you follow up with people after the event to let them know what's happening on the issues that were addressed.

### **PARTICIPATE IN ANOTHER ORGANIZATION'S TOWN HALL MEETING**

- ◆ If you don't have the time or resources to arrange your own town hall meeting, you can still use someone else's as an opportunity to engage your Senators and Representatives. Visit your representatives' websites to find out the time and date of any upcoming town hall meetings.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to stand up and ask questions. Make your questions precise and direct!

# WE CAN HELP!

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## *GET SUPPORT WITH YOU IN-DISTRICT ADVOCACY:*

Would you like to know more information on effective strategies for in-district advocacy, or do you have questions about anything in this toolkit? We are happy to provide National Rural Housing Coalition members with additional support in their efforts to engage Members of Congress.

Additionally, if any NRHC member has an event or project coming up, let us know! We are happy to help publicize your hard work on the NRHC webpage, Facebook and Twitter accounts.

For more information, please visit:

- ◆ **The NRHC Website** (<http://ruralhousingcoalition.org/>)
- ◆ **Our Facebook** ([www.facebook.com/NationalRuralHousingCoalition/](http://www.facebook.com/NationalRuralHousingCoalition/))
- ◆ **Our Twitter** (<https://twitter.com/RuralCoalition>) for more information!

Please contact Audrey Johnston at [audrey@rapoza.org](mailto:audrey@rapoza.org) or (202) 393 –5225 for additional information. We look forward to hearing from you!