



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 and their staff to visit your organization to learn more about the work that you do;
 - ◇ Encourage them to visit a local project; and
 - ◇ Meet one-on-one with Members and their staff
- ◆ Tips for using traditional and social media for advocacy

INTRODUCTION

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 and their staffs are in their District and States, you can create opportunities to strengthen your relationships with them.

Senators and Representatives are usually in their districts every Friday through Monday, and for several weeks during the year, including the month of August. When they return to Washington, D.C. in September, Congress will be in session only for about 4 four weeks before adjourning to campaign. All of the Members of the House and one-third third of the Senate will be back home all of October – looking for good photo opportunities.

Now is a great time to begin to engage with 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 proactive steps that can jumpstart the process of building a relationship with your Senators and Representatives at home. The key actions to achieve our advocacy goals, include:

- ◆ **Invite your Senators and Representatives and their staffs to visit a project** and learn why the work that your organization does is important to their state or district, and how that work is supported by important federal programs. Rural housing organizations have an advantage by providing Members with an opportunity to:
 - ◇ Help build a self-help house;
 - ◇ Tour a rental housing development and meet its residents; or
 - ◇ Meet with farmworkers and growers about the importance of the farmworker housing program.
- ◆ **Meet with your Senators and Representatives one-on-one at a district office;**

When Members and their staffs see these local efforts to improve housing in rural America firsthand, they are always impressed and quickly become supporters. This toolkit includes information and templates to assist with planning these two important advocacy actions, as well as other action opportunities using traditional and social media to raise the visibility of federal rural housing programs.

While these actions are not the only ways to engage your Senators and Representatives at home, they do make up the core components of a meaningful advocacy relationship built upon a foundation of familiarity, trust, and knowledge. There is nothing more important to maintaining and sustaining federal rural housing programs than building support in Congress. The Senators and Representatives who support rural housing programs are those who have seen the benefits of affordable housing in the rural communities they represent. So take the time to invite your Member of Congress and their staffs to a groundbreaking, a ribbon cutting or tour. When they see it, they will be sold!

Thank you for all of your hard work,



Robert A. Rapoza
National Rural Housing Coalition

INVITE YOUR SENATORS AND REPRESENTATIVES TO TOUR A PROJECT AND VISIT YOUR ORGANIZATION

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

Having a politician make an on-site visit to a project 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 and show the tangible impact of the programs they authorize and fund.

SHOWCASE YOUR ORGANIZATION

- ◆ Always try to organize your event in such a way that your Senators and Representatives and their staff can speak to, and meet with, a significant number of constituents.
- ◆ Some ideas include inviting your Senators and Representatives to:
 - ◇ Tour a Self-Help Housing project site, a rental housing development, or meet with growers and their farmworkers to demonstrate the importance and unique impact of each program; or
 - ◇ Showcase your organization’s successes at a ceremony, groundbreaking, or grand opening; or
 - ◇ Present an award from your organization recognizing their support of your cause.
- ◆ Personalize the experience by inviting a constituent who can share a personal story of how your organization’s work impacted their life. Individual clients or local government leaders can put a human face on the work you do. The impact of your work is 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 housing or community needs? Discuss how housing and community development programs foster job creation, economic growth, and increase the local tax base, in addition to safe, affordable housing. If your Representative or Senator is a member of a Committee with jurisdiction over federal housing programs or 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 (**See page 7 for invite template**). For example, the House recess typically starts in late July and runs through Labor Day, so now is a good time to reach out for an August invitation.
- ◆ Make your invitation stand out. Members of Congress get many invitations 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. And follow up with a phone call.
- ◆ 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.

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 and see the work of your organization, carries 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 to 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.
- ◆ **Connect the issue to specific local projects.** Explain how federal policy or funding made the development possible, its current status, and how the Members of Congress can help. If possible, bring another person or two who have benefitted or can speak to the benefit to the community—it can be very helpful to have others outside of your organization validate your work and impact.
- ◆ **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.** Learning 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.

SHORT ON TIME?

YOU CAN STILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

Do you have 5 minutes?

- ◆ Write a message on your elected officials' Facebook or Twitter pages and encourage others to share. Try to include state-specific information when you craft your short message. You can also share a link to the NRHC 2017 Impact Report.
 - ◇ Example tweets:
 - ⇒ Thanks @SenJohnHoeven for supporting #USDARuralHousing. It helped over 300,000 families last year afford to pay their rent. Read the 2017 Progress Report: <http://ruralhousingcoalition.org/news-publications-2/nrhc-2017impactreport/>
 - ⇒ @SenSchumer the #USDARuralHousing provided over 8,000 loans/grants in 2017 helping families find safe and affordable housing #InvestinRural
 - ◇ Example Facebook posts (Be sure to tag the member's official Facebook account):
 - ⇒ Send a video with a note. Senator McConnell, check out the work Housing Development Alliance is doing for rural communities as a great example of how affordable housing can help rural communities. www.housingdevelopmentalliance.org/
 - ⇒ Share a photo from a recent project: Sen. Durbin, did you know USDA Rural Housing programs have a big impact in Illinois? USDA Rural Housing programs invested over \$390 million in 2017 and provided over 12,000 loans/grants. Check out the work groups like us at Enterprise Community Partners are doing in your state to provide families with safe, affordable housing. www.enterprisecommunity.org

Do you have 15 minutes?

- ◆ Send a letter or email to your Senators and Representatives urging them to protect and support USDA Rural Housing programs.
- ◆ Reach out to your local press to set up on-site interviews to spread the word on your organization and all the hard work you're doing for often under-represented communities.

Do you have 30 minutes to an Hour?

- ◆ **Write a Letter to the Editor.** These are typically very short, around 200 words, and are usually submitted in response to an article recently published by the media outlet. (**Read tips on how to write and submit it on page 6.**)
- ◆ **Write an Op-Ed.** Submitting an opinion piece to your local or state press is a great way to bring attention to the work you are doing in your community. Highlight the projects and the effect affordable rural housing has had on rural families as well as creating and retaining jobs where they are needed the most. (**Read tips on how to write and submit it on page 6.**)

SHARE RURAL HOUSING SUCCESS LOCALLY!

Write an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor.

Submitting an opinion piece to your local or state press is a great way to bring attention to the impact of the USDA Rural Housing programs and safe, affordable housing in your community. Highlight projects and the benefits of the programs to rural families, economic growth, and job creation.

Editors do not publish every letter or op-ed, but they do pay attention—especially if it is well-written and timely. A Letter to the Editor is typically very short, around 200 words, and in response to an article the media outlet recently published. An op-ed is a longer opinion piece that provides information on a subject that would be of interest to the outlet’s readers. Therefore it is important to demonstrate how the issue affects individuals locally. To find out how to submit a Letter to the Editor either call or look on the outlet’s website.

- ◆ **Be timely.** Local outlets may not be consistently writing about rural housing or development, but they may be discussing the economy, jobs, and other types of services that are related to your work. This makes it fairly easy to find an article and relate it to concerns about the future of rural housing. The budget, unemployment, and the health of the economy can also be used as a lead-in.
- ◆ **Follow the rules.** Make sure to adhere to the outlet’s guidelines on length. Spell everything correctly and pay close attention to grammar—letters are not usually edited, rather the outlets select well-written letters that meet their guidelines. Include your name, full address, and number.
- ◆ **Be concise.** Include your main points in the first paragraph even if your media outlet length guidelines are greater than 200 words. Two to three points are ideal.
- ◆ **Avoid jargon and acronyms.** Explain points in “plain English.” and make the information more understandable and accessible to a wider audience.

Email your letter to ensure timeliness. To do this, paste the text into the body of an email—DO NOT SEND AS AN ATTACHMENT. You may also fax it, but sending it electronically is generally the preferred way to receive letters.

Lastly, be sure to copy us or forward your submission and we will have our PR Firm follow up on placement. Remember, we are here and happy to help!

SEEING IS BELIEVING!

HOW TO INVITE YOUR MEMBER TO VISIT A PROJECT.

[DATE]

The Honorable [NAME]

US House of Representatives/U.S. Senate

[ADDRESS]

Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative/Senator [LAST NAME]:

As we approach the midterm elections, the economy and jobs continue to be a top priority for Congress and the people they represent. However for many rural Americans, those priorities are hindered by a lack of affordable and accessible housing. USDA Rural Housing Service programs are making a tangible impact in our communities in [STATE], as well as around the country. USDA subsidized loans, grants, and related assistance, provide low-income families with the opportunity to own, and (in many cases) build their own home; provide affordable rental housing to families, the elderly and migrant and seasonal farmworkers and; support the low-cost repair of those homes. To better illustrate this point, I would like to invite you to tour [PROJECT], an USDA funded project located in [CITY], to hear from [local constituents/local officials] about the difference this financing has made in the community and their lives.

[COMPANY] would be honored if you would join us for tour and discussion on rural housing and development and its effect on the people of [STATE]. We invite you to join us from [TIME, e.g. 8:00-9:30 am on DATE]; but we are flexible if there is another time that would work better for your schedule. Specifically, we would give you a tour of our facility [DESCRIBE WHAT S/HE WILL SEE, WHO WILL BE THERE/CONSTITUENTS]

I will follow up this request with your office, or you may reach me at [PHONE/EMAIL].

Thank you for your attention and we hope to see you here soon.

Sincerely,

[YOUR NAME]

[TITLE]

[COMPANY]

WE CAN HELP!

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
- ◆ **Our Twitter** @RuralCoalition for more information!

Please contact Jake Kohn at jake@rapoza.org or (202) 393 –5225 for additional information. We look forward to hearing from you!