Educating the New Congress: Step-by-Step Advocacy Training Series for Homeless Educators and Service Providers

6-PART SERIES

Part II - How to Effectively Communicate with Congress

FEBRUARY 23, 2021; 2:30PM EASTERN
About SchoolHouse Connection

SchoolHouse Connection works to overcome homelessness through education. We provide strategic advocacy and technical assistance in partnership with schools, early childhood programs, institutions of higher education, service providers, families, and youth.

- Website: http://www.schoolhouseconnection.org
- Newsletter: https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/sign-up/
- Federal and state policy advocacy
- Q&A from our inbox
- Webinars and implementation tools
- Youth leadership and scholarships
Special Guest Presenters

Thomas J. Lucas, Legislative Assistant
U.S. Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV)

Anna Dietderich, Legislative Assistant
U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)
SHC’s Advocacy Training Series

1. Getting Grounded: Advocacy in the New Congress
2. How to Effectively Communicate with Congress
3. What Does Successful Advocacy Look Like? Learning from Peers
4. Shining a Light: Using Media (and Social Media) to Boost Legislative Advocacy
5. How To Engage Parents and Youth with Lived Experience in Advocacy
6. How to Apply These Lessons Closer to Home: State Policy Advocacy

https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/learn/webinars/upcoming-webinars/
Recap --
Part I: Getting Grounded: Advocacy in the New Congress

Last session, we covered:

- The importance of constituent engagement in the legislative process
- The difference between advocacy and lobbying
- The unique dynamics of the 117th Congress
- What’s at stake for children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness
- Most likely opportunities for impactful advocacy in the 117th
- What you can do now
Objectives of Today’s Session

1. Best strategies for communicating with Congress
2. Effective Meetings: Preparing, During, Following Up, Do’s and Don’ts
3. Online and Other Forms of Advocacy
“Citizen-Centric Advocacy: During the Pandemic”
Congressional Management Foundation

- My Member/Senator is more open to using technology to engage with constituents than they used to be.
  - Agree & Strongly Agree: 89%
  - Disagree & Strongly Disagree: 2%

- My office is receiving more communications from constituents than we did prior to the COVID-19 crisis.
  - Agree & Strongly Agree: 63%
  - Disagree & Strongly Disagree: 9%

- My office is having substantive interactions with more constituents.
  - Agree & Strongly Agree: 59%
  - Disagree & Strongly Disagree: 9%
“Citizen-Centric Advocacy: During the Pandemic”
Congressional Management Foundation

- Video conferences with constituents: 65%
- Telephone conference calls with constituents: 57%
- In-person meetings with constituents: 88%

Significantly Less - Significantly More
Common Methods of Communicating with Congress

Meetings
- Group/Individual
- Town hall

Letters
- Individual
- Group sign-on letters

Phone calls

Social Media
Nuts and Bolts of Meeting with Congressional Offices
(Applies virtually, too)

Before:
- Setting up the Meeting
- Preparing for the Meeting

During:
- Conducting the Meeting

After:
- Following Up from the Meeting
First: Understanding Titles of Congressional Staff

By level of seniority/responsibility:

- Legislative Correspondent
- Legislative Aide
- Legislative Assistant
- Counsel
- Legislative Director
- Chief of Staff
Reach out to the staff who handles the issues you plan to discuss Typically:

- Education staff covers early childhood, K-12, and higher education. See education staff contacts here.
- Housing staff covers HUD homeless assistance. See housing staff contacts here.
- Phone numbers for US Representatives’ offices can be found on www.house.gov and phone numbers for US Senate offices can be found on www.senate.gov

Include the purpose of your meeting, who will be joining you (if anyone), and the times that you are available to meet.
Subject Line: Request Meeting about Homeless Children in NAME OF CITY/STATE

“Hello Anna

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Barbara, and I am a social worker at St. Mary’s Place (a transitional housing program in XX. I’m reaching out to see if you might meet with me and a few colleagues about the COVID-19 package and children and youth experiencing homelessness. I’d like to include representatives from the XX school district and Head Start program. We’re available after 3pm on Monday, Thursday, and Friday of the next few weeks. Thanks very much for your consideration.”
Note: As a result of the pandemic, most Congressional offices have made the switch to virtual and socially-distanced meetings.

- Staff will either reply with a time they can meet, or find another staff in the office who is available at that time.

- Occasionally, if the Senator or Member is available, they will see if he or she can join the meeting.

- **SHC can help:** We will set up virtual Congressional meetings for you. Sign up [here](#)!
TIPS

- Legislative staff are critical; they have tremendous influence. 
  **Good relations with staff are essential.**

- Most legislators don’t do details, but *if they commit to an issue, it is GOLD.*

- It is also worth trying to “meet” with legislators when back at home.
Become familiar with the top issues that Congress is currently considering that directly relate to homeless children, youth, and families.

- Review SHC’s federal policy page for background information, including fact sheets and current status.
Do a little research:

● Has the Member been a champion or expressed interest in an issue that can be connected to the education, health, and well-being of children and youth experiencing homelessness?
  ○ For example, trafficking, opioids, child care, mental health, housing, etc.

● Be prepared to connect the Member’s top issue to the work that you do.
Developing Relationships: Make it local, Make it visual, Make it personal

In thinking about constituents and the groups that represent them (e.g., associations, nonprofits, companies), what should they do more or less of to build better relationships with your office and your Member/Senator?

- Provide materials (such as maps, charts or infographics) that visually show the impact on the district or state of an issue or bill: 85%
- Meet or get to know the Legislative Assistant with jurisdiction over their issue area: 79%
- Provide materials (such as research or topics to be covered) in advance of meetings: 76%
- Meet or get to know the District/State Director: 62%
- Organize constituent meetings in the district/state: 59%

Should do more of
Prepare a 1-page document (two-sided) with local or state information that relates directly to the issues on which you would like the Member to take action. (SHC can help!)

- Include local statistics/data if you have them.
- Be prepared to give specific example of or story about a problem that the legislation would address, and how the legislation would positively impact children and youth.
- If you don’t have time to prepare a document in advance, jot down some talking points, then send information to the staff after the meeting.
During: Anatomy of a Congressional meeting

1. Start with **brief introductions** (your name, your agency, what you do)
2. State the **purpose of the meeting**, including the specific legislative issues you’d like to discuss.
3. Ask if the staff is **familiar with McKinney-Vento** (or the issue you wish to discuss).
4. **Share** your local or state document/information, and walk the staff through the basics: local trends, and challenges related to the legislative issues; how the pending legislation would help.
5. **Close by making the requests:** support more funding for the EHCY; sign on as a co-sponsor to the Emergency Family Stabilization Act
6. **Thank the staff** for their time. Offer to be a resource for them on these topics, and to organize a socially distanced site visit, if possible, for the Member when he/she is back in the district/state.
TIPS

- Plan for a maximum of 20 minutes, perhaps shorter.
- Think of the visit as a conversation, not as a presentation – pause, ask if they have questions, be responsive to their interests.
- If you don’t know the answer, let the staff know you’ll find the answer and get back to him or her; you also can refer them to SHC.
- If you are attending the meeting with a group, consider assigning people to open the meeting, close the meeting, and move the conversation along.
- The person with the hometown connection or the constituent should lead the introductions and the conversation.
Email the staff a thank you note, attach electronic copies of your local/state information, and reiterate your request.

Offer again to be a resource for them on these topics.

Try to organize a socially-distanced site visit for the Member when she/he is back in the district/state, and/or attend a virtual Town Hall Meeting.

Look for reasons to stay in touch: sending local news articles, and reaching out when any of the top three bills (or related bills) move forward in the legislative process.
After #2: Follow-up is Essential

- **Send another thank you** if the Member does sign on as a co-sponsor, or take another specific action.

- **Ask other local groups/people**, particularly those who know/have a relationship with the Member, to follow up on the issue.

- **Let SHC know how the meeting went!** - We can follow up and provide additional supporting information.
Other Forms of Advocacy: Electronic Form Letters

- Online/electronic letters are **NOT** a substitute for face-to-face meetings: nothing replaces meetings and direct contact for relationship-building.
- However, generating large numbers of **PERSONALIZED** electronic letters can be helpful in drawing attention to an issue.
How helpful is it for messages from constituents to include the following?

- Information about the impact the bill would have on the district or state: 91% very helpful/helpful, 9% very frequent/frequent
- Constituent’s reasons for supporting/opposing the bill or issue: 90% very helpful/helpful, 50% very frequent/frequent
- Specific request or “ask”: 88% very helpful/helpful, 59% very frequent/frequent
- Personal story related to the bill or issue: 79% very helpful/helpful, 18% very frequent/frequent
What Can You Do About the COVID Package Right Now?

Tell your Members that the COVID package **must** target flexible funding to children and youth experiencing homelessness, broadly defined, or it is highly unlikely to reach them.

The message:

“I urge you to include targeted, flexible funding for children and youth experiencing homelessness in the next COVID relief package. Without targeted funding, homeless children and youth are unlikely to benefit from other education investments, as they face significant barriers to their safety, education, shelter/housing, child care, and other services. **This SHC/U-M study shows the consequences of not targeting of CARES dollars to children and youth experiencing homelessness.**”
What Can You Do About the COVID Package Right Now?

1. Edit the email message to include state or local facts and experiences.
2. Click [here](#) to find a contact sheet for Congressional Education/Services staffers

**NOTE:** If you have an existing relationship with your local Congressional office, please also reach out to your regular contact.
SHC’s RallyCongress Platform

Rally Congress is an online platform that delivers supporters' electronic messages, phone calls, tweets, and letters to lawmakers.

Simply enter your zip code, edit the template letter, and send.

You can also send tweets to your legislators and make calls from the site, too.
How to Stay Up-to-Date on the Issues

- To see if your Member has signed on as a cosponsor, go to Congress.gov, and type in the bill number or name of the legislation.
- Check out the Member’s social media
- Sign up for SHC’s e-newsletter
- Check out SHC’s federal policy page
Next Session
Part III: What Does Successful Advocacy Look Like?
Learning from Peers

In the next session, we’ll host a conversation with peers on how to enter the advocacy space and the impact that it can have.

Melissa Douglas, Homeless Liaison, Kansas City Public Schools, MO

Dominique Tornabe, Chief Impact Officer, Family Promise of Morris County
Questions?
Let’s Get Social

Sign up for our newsletter: https://schoolhouseconnection.org/sign-up
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/SchoolHouseConnection/
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