

Getting Through To Governments

A Civic Engagement Guide for Action

Aspen Policy Academy Staff November 2025



Introduction

This guide is designed as a resource to help readers learn how to advocate on behalf of the issues they care about.

Too many people don't think to reach out to their city council members, state representatives, or members of Congress because they think their voices won't be heard or their opinions don't matter. But if you were to ask those officials directly, most would say that this couldn't be further from the truth. Government officials want to know what you think.

That's why we've collected guidance from people familiar with how policy gets made — advocates, staffers, and former officials themselves — about what actually works when reaching out to policymakers. Anyone interested in making lasting change in the communities they care about can use the lessons here to help guide their own advocacy journey.



Regardless of your familiarity with the policy process, everyone is an expert through their lived experience. A deep understanding of the issues affecting you on a day-to-day basis is the foundation of successful advocacy. Policymakers care about changing people's lives for the better. By sharing your story and your ideas of how government can work better, you can play a direct role in shaping what that change looks like.

How Good Policy Gets Made

"When we're representing a district, a city, whatever it is . . . , especially on tricky issues, you want to make good policy, but you're also trying to represent the people you're there to represent. And that requires getting input from them."

Jordan Cunningham, former California state assemblyman

A key thing to keep in mind throughout this process: In order to be a successful advocate, you do not need to know everything about the issue you care about. You do not need to know everything about the political process. You do not need to know everything about how a bill becomes a law. While you need to know something about those processes — and this guide should help give you some of that background — the main things you need are passion for your issue and a willingness to speak out on behalf of the change you want to see.

Sharing your perspective with policymakers and your ideas for what to change - and how to change it can happen in many different contexts. We want to help you use your personal story to influence policy at any level, and you'll find that many of the tips for doing that are relevant for a variety of policymakers and institutions. Whether the issues you care about are being influenced at the local, state, or federal levels, your story can help make an impact.

Your Expertise

"With so many topics for so many legislators to know about, your knowledge helps them to do their job. You are the expert in telling your story and how it relates to decisions they're making."

Diana Stadden, former advocate with Arc of Washington State

Let's talk about how.

Why Advocate?

When we talk about advocacy, we're talking broadly about the process of speaking out to decisionmakers on behalf of the issues you care about. That might be because there's a problem that needs to be solved, or because someone requires the kind of help that only a policymaker can provide.

The question to ask yourself when beginning the process of speaking out on an issue is: "What is the problem I want solved?" The answer to that question can help inform who you reach out to for help solving it.

On Showing Up

"Not showing up is viewed as speaking up. Officials really do care about [questions like], 'Has anyone come to weigh in on this issue? Does anyone care about this issue?'

If they hear silence, they assume no one cares."

Alex Reid, former congressional staffer

Federal, State, and Local Outreach

Before you start, you need to figure out what level of government you want to approach. At the federal level, you might need to consider reaching out to Congress to advocate for changes to laws that affect issues you care about at a national level. At the state level, think about the role your state's legislature, governor's office, state agencies and regulators, and state courts can play. At the local level, there are city councilmembers, county officials, and neighbors that run or work for government departments that address issues affecting your daily life, such as parks, sanitation, and transportation. A successful advocacy campaign can engage stakeholders at any level.

Double-Up Food Bucks: A Local Program That Spread Nationwide

Federal, state, and local advocacy efforts often intersect and build on each other. For example, as NPR reported in 2014, Maryland's Crossroads Farmer's market was one of the country's first markets to pilot a program to help low income residents afford fresh food by raising money to offer vouchers increasing the value of SNAP funds (food stamps).

The idea spread across the country, including to Oklahoma. Mike Appell introduced the program at the Tulsa Farmers Market and explained its value for farmers and local residents to a staffer for his local congressman. That congressman happened to be chairman of the House Agriculture Committee and helped arrange federal funding for the program nationally. Thanks to a combination of federal funding, private support, and state and local help, the Double-Up Food Bucks program now supports local agriculture nationwide and makes fresh food available at farmers markets, farm stands, and grocery stores in over 25 states.

Ultimately, advocacy is about creating lasting change. This can happen through changing laws, regulations, and other forms of policies that impact you or your community. Constructively engaging with the government officials responsible for making these policies can be a critical tool in making your voice heard.

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I. General Tips For Getting Through To Governments

Regardless of how you are going to try to make your voice heard with government officials, there are a few common tips that apply to any kind of government advocacy. To be an effective advocate, you need to treat government stakeholders as partners in an ongoing relationship. The pointers below apply to all types of policy-related communication and should help you establish an initial relationship that you can strengthen over time.

Before You Engage

• Identify a Goal. The first step is finding an issue that matters to you and working to understand it. But you'll have more success if you go even further — how do you want that issue solved? Develop a clear "ask" so there's no question about what you want your official to do about your problem.

Setting Your Goals

"I always say, have your moonshot goal — the big thing that if you could do anything, you would shoot for. That will help you develop a short-term goal that you want to achieve right away, and a long-term goal that maybe you can achieve in the next year, or the next five years. Your short-term and long-term goals are steps that push you in the direction of your moonshot."

Dr. M. Elle Saine, Public Health Taskforce codirector, Doctors for America

• **Find Strength in Numbers.** Advocacy can have more of an impact if you show that your position on an issue is one that's shared broadly. Consider bringing in multiple voices to echo your position, whether that's by organizing a group to make phone calls, joining up to testify as a group at your city council meeting, or collaborating to travel together to meet with your local or state representatives.

The Power of a Crowd

"Especially if you're trying to advocate for a bill or a formal policy change to a committee, if you brought in 50 small business owners who all briefly told a personal story in support of a bill, you could really influence people's votes."

Jordan Cunningham, former California state assemblyman

When Talking About Your Issue

Keep It Short. Policymakers and their staff have a shortage of time and a surplus of issues to deal with. Advocates don't often get lots of time in front of policymakers to make a point: A phone call might last less than 90 seconds, a public comment at a county meeting might last only 2 minutes per speaker, and in-person meetings with a representative might only allow for 15 minutes of conversation. Practice making your point quickly and concisely.



• Offer a Solution. Accomplishments are the currency of government officials. You can help them by offering them a clear solution to the problem that motivated your outreach. This can be as simple as "Vote against this bill," or as complicated as proposing a new program. The more you can do the hard work of thinking through how to solve your problem, the less your outreach looks like one more problem to address and more like a potential accomplishment your stakeholder can claim.

Obvious Wins Get Adopted

"When I was on Tulsa's city council, a constituent emailed me and said, "Hey, I noticed that city elections are held on a different day than the state elections. If you held them on the state's election day, not only would it be easier to vote, the state would pay for it and would save the city about \$300,000.

This was an easy win – I wanted to save the city money, and here was a way to do that. We adopted it as soon as we could since this was such an obvious win for the city."

G.T. Bynum, former mayor of Tulsa

• Always Be Respectful. Most policymakers respond best to engagement that's respectful, kind, and consistent. Focus on attacking an issue, versus attacking a person, ensuring your official stays open to partnering with you.

Persistence Pays

"Even if you panic because someone didn't respond to one telephone call, you should come back with another call. You don't know — that first call might have been missed. Don't be afraid to ask for what you want over and over again.

But being mean, disrespectful, or nasty doesn't get you anywhere. If you want to talk about something serious, be helpful."

London Breed, former mayor of San Francisco

After You Engage

- Don't Be Afraid of "No." When you're asking something of a government official, a "no" is not the end of a relationship. It can mean many things: "No, it's not the right time," "No, you don't have the right partners," and so on. A "no" doesn't necessarily mean "never," and you can use the legwork you've done that led up to the "no" to keep the door open to revisiting your solution at a better time, or to considering your Plan B solution.
- Expect the Unexpected. Working with governments can be different from working on projects anywhere else. Some incredibly governments are nimble; others are slow and deliberative. Some officials are very responsive; others are inundated with messages and triaging their inboxes daily. Especially if you're planning on a long engagement with a government partner on issue, you can save yourself future headaches if you take time to learn - and adapt to their capabilities and expectations.

Be Flexible with Your Timeline

"Expect a different timeline than you might be used to. If I had been committed to something happening with the state on a very fast timeline, I would have been frustrated. We've had consistent communication with the state and have made progress, but it might be another year before we actually see results. Understanding and accepting that timeline has made my life around my advocacy more relaxed."

Dr. Jordan Loewen-Colón, cofounder, Al Alt Lab

II. Outreach Tools For Government Officials

There are a number of effective ways to reach out to your government officials. The one you choose to start with depends on you — your goals, your time commitments, your capacity. While the best outreach tool will always be the one that you can commit to, you can consider each of the methods below as part of your initial or sustained outreach to government executives, legislators, and their staffs, about the issues you care about.

Below, we'll discuss how you can use a range of tools – calling, emailing, commenting, informally meeting, and briefing – to reach out to government officials:

Outreach Tool	Advantages	Disadvantages
Calling your Representative (p. 10) For registering support or opposition for a policy change	Lowest barrier to entryLow costImmediate impact	Less effective for in- depth discussions of issues
Emailing Government Officials (p. 11) For sharing longer discussions of problems you're facing and potential solutions to them	Low barrier to entry Valuable for educating representatives on a problem and advocating for a solution	 Less effective in fast-moving policy discussions More time and dedication required to craft a powerful message
Commenting at a Local Government Meeting (p. 13) For formally participating in policy discussions open to public input	 Offers opportunities to regularly engage policymakers Officials are a captive audience — they must listen to and consider submissions 	 Opportunities to do this may not be available for every policy decision Often most impactful as part of a longer process involving sustained commenting and engagement
Informally Meeting with Government Officials (p. 15) For advocating for an issue by meeting officials where you can find them	 Can lead to open and honest discussions of an issue Valuable for building relationships 	Less useful when officials have lower public profiles
Briefing Government Officials (p. 17) For formally engaging an official or their staff about an issue and how it should be resolved	 Valuable for establishing a dialogue on an issue with a policymaker and their staff Meeting face-to-face can essential when sharing stories, data, and other in-depth information 	Can require significant time and resource investment, particularly if done in person

Calling an Official

Calling a government official is one of the most common – and most effective – ways of making your voice heard. It doesn't take very long: An effective call can take 90 seconds or less. This is one of the most common tools to reach governments because it is so easy to do. Legislators and other government officials often publicly post their public phone numbers on their websites. There are also a number of apps, advocacy groups, and aggregators who have created tools to make it easy to find the phone number of your representatives with just a few clicks.

The Power of Calls

"Multiple different congressional staffers told me that the more effort something takes, the more seriously congressional offices treat it. So going into the office to meet with someone is the most effective thing you can do, but not everyone can do that.

Calls are the next effective thing to that, since you actually have to take the time to talk to someone on the phone. Calls are great because they're fast, effective, and immediate."

Rebecca Kaufman, cofounder, 5 Calls

When calling a government official, there are four tips to keep in mind:

- **1. Be Kind.** The person answering the phone for government offices is often not the same person making key decisions. Their job is to politely answer the phone and track the volume of calls for and against each issue. Arguing with them likely will not accomplish much; politely stating your position and telling them that you're a constituent might.
- **2. Be Brief.** Calling in favor of or against an issue is often a numbers game. The staffer keeping track on the phone should share the volume of calls with the policymaker, and the amount of calls or lack of calls on one side or another of an issue plays a role in convincing the policymaker what to do. Therefore, making your point quickly in **90 seconds** or less can do more for your issue than keeping a staffer on the phone for 30 minutes. After your 90-second call, you're freeing the line for another caller to add their voice to the tally.

- 3. Be Direct. Make things easy for the person keeping track of your support or opposition by being clear about the exact issue you're calling about. This means referencing the number of the legislation, the title of the policy proposal, or the name of the person being nominated to the position you're concerned about.
- 4. Be Persistent. Especially when you're calling to have a substantive conversation or set up a meeting with a government official, persistence is the key to success. Calling can be like shooting in the dark, especially when you're not sure who the right person is to speak to on your issue, and whether or not they're available at any given time. Continuing your efforts to connect if your initial try doesn't succeed is vital.

Try Multiple Communication Methods

"When I approached the state about working with them to create a framework for responsible deployment, I was emailing, calling multiple times, leaving messages. We could have given up, but it turned out that the office was so didn't new. thev have their answering machine hooked up. They were actually super interested in working with us. You never know the reason why someone is not getting back to you. It's not always a reflection of someone not being interested in working with you."

Dr. Jordan Loewen-Colón, cofounder, Al Alt Lab

Emailing an Official

Email is another important tool to consider when advocating to government officials. An advantage email has over calls is that you have the space to go more in depth.

Emails are the backbone of government communication. Every new policy problem, proposal for change, and draft text goes through a government official or staffer's inbox at some point in a lengthy process. You can use that process to your advantage by reaching out directly to officials with the power to adopt the change you want to see and asking them to adopt your ideas.

At the same time, emails are not always as easy for government officials to track, especially if the issue is particularly time sensitive. For those, it may be better to call.

Email Pitfalls

"In Congress, even when you submit an email through a form, someone has to read the email and categorize it into the software they use to keep track of it all. That takes time, and it's less immediate than a phone call is. So with something fast moving, the calls are tallied immediately and voicemails are tallied daily, and those are reported back in staff meetings, both in DC and in local offices. **But** emails might not get read and tallied for some time after a vote has happened. Some emails might never get seen."

Rebecca Kaufman, cofounder. 5 Calls

You can often find the emails of public officials, or their staff, on their government websites — especially at the state or local level. While emailing an official directly is always best, do not be discouraged from using a comment form, which is often a common option on government websites. These submissions do go to real inboxes for someone to review and act upon.

If you choose email as your outreach tool of choice, here are some tips:

1. Begin with Pleasantries and Introductions:

You want your reader to immediately understand why your issue is relevant to them, and that you are someone who wants to work with them to adopt a solution. That means beginning your email with something friendly, such as thanking the official for their work, and establishing from the beginning that you are someone they should listen to — for example, you are a constituent, or a proud parent in X neighborhood, or a struggling student in Y district, and so on.

Explain Why They Should Listen

"It was most effective when someone emailed me directly. I saw my job as enacting the good ideas other people had, so I took pride in being responsive when anyone reached out to me. But if someone reached out to shame me for not doing something, someone who had never tried to reach out to me before about the issue or work with me on it — that instantly lost me. It made me think, 'This is not a person that wants to work constructively."

G.T. Bynum, former mayor of Tulsa

Experience Matters

"Most of my policy work came from people with real life experiences. It was harder to trust and support advocates who had no idea what it was like to be the people who they were advocating for. Those kinds of advocates were often looking for someone to blame instead of someone to work with. That never works."

London Breed, former mayor of San Francisco

2. Put Your Bottom Line Up Front:

This is different from how many of us learned to write, where we save most important piece information – here, the thing you want to ask the official to do - for the end of the document. You should write your email for a busy policymaker or a busy staffer, and make it easy for them to know what your issue is and what you want them to do about it. Do this by putting that information at the beginning of your email, and then give necessary context: "I'm writing to you to ask that you support Bill ABC, and here's why."

- **3. Share Your Story:** Government officials are just like anyone else, except for one thing: Elected officials especially are often good storytellers, and stories are what capture their attention. Share how the issue you're writing about affects you personally. This should give you the credibility necessary for your reader to adopt your perspective.
- **4. Be Brief:** Just as with other forms of communication, you should write your emails to policymakers in the spirit of respecting the time of very busy people. The more concisely you can make your points, the easier it should be for your reader to understand and take action on them.

Speaking Up at a Local Government Meeting

Beyond one-way outreach like making a call or sending an email, you can also influence government decisionmaking by taking part in processes where public participation plays a key role. One of the most universal options is to speak up at meetings of your local government — whether that's your town, city, or county.

Local governments regularly hold sessions open to the public where policymakers or legislators meet to discuss and decide issues on their agenda, such as at your local city council or your state utility commission. Attending and offering comments at open meetings such as these can be an essential way to engage in the policy process.

Finding Public Meetings: To find specific dates and times for public meetings, including committee meetings that cover specific topics, such as land use or housing, you can search the legislative calendar of the city, county, or state government website.

Attending and speaking up at one of these meetings can be a crucial first step in making your voice heard and advancing an issue you care about. At a public meeting, you'll learn what issues are taking up your representatives' time and what the concerns around them are; you'll learn the personalities of the people involved; and you'll learn what might move the needle in getting action taken on the issues you care about. You'll also make the key stakeholders aware that you're someone they can work with on this topic.

Preparing to Comment: Public meetings often allow observers to do more than

just spectate. Public comment periods, where members of the public can make their voices heard on specific or general issues, are a common feature of public meetings like those at city councils and county boards.

To speak in person, you might have to register at the meeting and note what agenda item you would like to comment on. Government bodies might also allow commenters to submit their comments in writing or to participate virtually. These public comment opportunities are very short — often only lasting less than two minutes per speaker.

If you plan to comment, preparing your remarks is important. Comments that are inappropriate, off topic, or touch on issues outside of the body's jurisdiction will likely have little influence on advancing the issue you care about, and could potentially cause you to get removed from the meeting.

Navigating an Agenda

"There's a lot that goes into every council agenda. My advice would be to not look at the agenda to begin with. There's often what's called a summary agenda, or list of agenda items, which is a breakdown of the agenda in an easy-to-read format. Once you actually know what items of interest you have and what you want to speak to or learn more about, you can get that item number and then go to the agenda. Then you can search for the item number and click any hyperlinks to see all the backup information."

> Diana J. S. Fuentes, San Diego city clerk

Preparation Counts

"Come prepared. Know what you want to speak about, maybe even write it down. The important thing is to know what you're talking about and what you're asking for. You only have a couple of minutes."

Diana J. S. Fuentes, San Diego city clerk

Directly Engaging: If you already have an idea of how the group you are engaging can solve your issue, you can consider drafting ordinance or other form of policy document that adopts the solution you want to see. Many public meetings allow members of the public to propose ordinances. This could involve giving brief presentation during the meeting's public comment period and asking the council to put the issue on the agenda at their next meeting. This should kick off a longer project in which the council will hopefully give the proposal full consideration.

Play the Long Game

"I once spoke at my city council meeting and asked them something, knowing there was no way they were going to do what I asked. Instead, I was trying to get them to know who I was and open up opportunity for longer an conversation. **It** worked. and eventually succeeded in getting what I wanted!"

> Betsy Cooper, director, Aspen Policy Academy

Informally Meeting with Government Officials

In contrast to formal processes that governments have set up to hear from the public, it can often be the case, especially at the local level, that you have access to any number of government officials in and around your own neighborhood. You can use that to your advantage; talk to officials honestly and openly about the issues you care about informally, such as at community events, while volunteering, or while out and about.



Photo by Ian Hutchinson on Unsplash

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When thinking about advocating to officials informally, keep in mind the following tips:

Tailoring Your Approach

"There's no one-size-fits-all approach to advocating for yourself. It depends on the level of government you're talking about.

When I was on the Board of Supervisors, I was out in the neighborhood all the time. I had staff who responded to emails, but if someone came up to me and said they were in trouble — someone in a crisis, someone who was about to be evicted — that got my attention and I'd do what I could to help."

London Breed, former mayor of San Francisco

- **1. Be Constructive.** While you can often talk to an elected official after an event with persistence, that meeting will be most effective if you treat the official as a partner and offer to help as much as you can.
- **2. Personalize Your Issue.** Just as with a formal meeting, sharing why the issue matters to you or to people you care about is key to helping the official understand and empathize with you.

Direct Engagement in Action

"Someone reaching out directly to me was often the most effective way to get my attention.

After I was elected mayor, I spent a long transition period doing community town halls to talk to people about what they wanted the city to do. Someone kept showing up who wanted to know what I was going to do for the Hispanic community in Tulsa. She was armed with data about the positive impact that community had on the city; she had obviously done her homework. She would come to meeting after meeting and left behind materials each time. She was clearly passionate about this issue, and eventually I just offered her a position in my administration to work on it, which she was great at."

G.T. Bynum, former mayor of Tulsa

- **3. Explain Your Issue.** Do research beforehand so you can use data, statistics, or history as support. Instead of shaping the conversation around "Here's this thing that I don't like," try approaching your official with information such as, "Here's statistics showing that this is a problem," or "Here's how somewhere else fixed this problem that we can also do." This type of information is more likely to capture their attention and lead to follow-up conversations.
- **4. Share Your Ask.** Failing to share what you want the official to do about your problem taking or withholding an action, supporting or opposing a proposal, hiring or firing an agency head is the most common way an informal conversation like this can lose momentum. Have a clear ask ahead of time and share it up front.

Offering Easy Wins

"You'd be shocked how many people don't bring a solution to the table. Conservatively, 90% of the people who would come to me with a problem would just leave it to me to solve it. But the more legwork someone had done to show me how to do the solution, the more inclined I was to do it. Every elected official is deluged with things to work on, but things that were easy to implement were always easier to say yes to."

G.T. Bynum, former mayor of Tulsa



Photo by Hansjorg Keller on Unsplash

Briefing Government Officials

Arranging a formal meeting with a government official is one of the most impactful ways to effect change for the issues you care about. Government officials and their staff welcome taking meetings with constituents on the problems you see in your community and how you think they should be solved.

These meetings can be surprising at times. The location is often not what you'd expect: Government office space can be limited, so sometimes meetings can happen in small or crowded areas. For example, congressional staffers frequently take meetings in hallways or cafeterias — which is less a reflection of how serious these meetings are and more of how extremely small congressional offices are.

You can also expect these meetings to be short. Many meetings might last for 15 minutes or less; more often you'll have between 20 and 30 minutes to make your points. This is why it's important to be clear, concise, and on topic.

Capitol or District?

If you're considering reaching out to a legislator, either in Congress or in your state, another consideration is that legislators generally have two offices: a **district office** in the area they represent, and a **capitol office** located wherever the legislature meets. Large districts might have more than one office.

Legislators have staff in both capitol and district offices that are available to meet with constituents. The district, however, will often be more prepared to more directly help constituents with problems they're facing locally. So when researching how to reach out to your elected official, keep the district office in mind as an important point of contact.

Build Relationships with Staff

"I think people don't appreciate that members of Congress, and certainly their staff, can't be experts on every issue. So meeting with them helps personalize an issue for the staff, and it also helps bring an issue more into the consciousness of the member."

Lauren Bazel, former US Senate staffer

Finally, while you might think the most effective meeting would be with the decisionmaker at the top – the mayor, the member of Congress, the agency head - often you will be more impactful by meeting with their staff, especially if there is a staff member with responsibility for your issue. Generally, they should be more knowledgeable and more willing to spend time with you than the ultimate decisionmaker might be - so don't get discouraged if you can only get a meeting with a staffer. This is actually a valuable step in moving your issue forward and in building a relationship with your policymaker.

When planning your meeting, take into consideration both stages of the process: **Preparing for Your Meeting** and **Taking Your Meeting**.

Phase 1: Preparing for the Briefing

Preparing for a meeting with a government official can be a familiar process for anyone with experience researching and planning to do a new activity. There are three key steps to consider when getting ready before you meet.

Step 1: Schedule the Meeting. Think about making your meeting request far in advance of when you would actually like to meet, typically at least four to six weeks in advance for busy policymakers. Be sure to share several potential meeting dates that work for you with the official's scheduler, as well as the topic you want to discuss. This is so the office can help ensure the most relevant staff member can attend.

You should also share who plans to attend the meeting and whether or not they're constituents of your official — if you and others attending with you are constituents, make that fact known. The website of your representative should have information about how to contact their office by phone or email. Once a meeting is on your calendar, confirm the meeting details one last time the day before the meeting.

Building the Relationship

"We did research before the initial meeting we set up with the state, just so we were aware who we were talking to. I went into it thinking I wanted to know their general motivations. So in that first conversation, I treated the staff just like any other human beings. I got to know them for a little bit — we chatted about our kids and families, and connected on a human level. That built up a level of trust that created a foundation for our later work."

Dr. Jordan Loewen-Colón, cofounder, Al Alt Lab

Step 2: Do Your Homework. Before your meeting, it will be helpful if you arm yourself with background on your issue. History, important data points, and things your representative has said are all useful information to be familiar with ahead of time. You can also find it helpful to identify connection points between you and your representative. Have they done something positive that you can thank them for? Did you go to the same high school or college? Do you have children around the same age? These are all things you can prepare to bring up to help build a relationship with the representative and their office.

Your Story Matters

"If you can just come in, not be intimidated by the trappings of the office, and tell a compelling story about the issue and how it affects you, that's what they want to hear. Compelling stories are what sells. If they remember you and remember your story, they're more likely to be willing to help you."

Alex Reid, former congressional staffer

Step 3: Practice. You might have less time than you anticipate at your meeting. Interruptions are common, so you should practice being prepared to make your key points quickly. This includes introducing yourself, making ask. sharing your more information about your issue, crucially. sharing vour personal story about how the issue affects you and why you're motivated to act.

Phase 2: Making Your Case

Meeting with a government official can be intimidating because of how unfamiliar it can be. But no matter the official or the issue, you can make your meeting more manageable by breaking it down into six steps.

Step 1: Introduce Yourself. Thank the staff person or representative for meeting with you, and if you're a constituent, share information like your neighborhood or any organizations you're active with to help make a connection. If you're meeting with a staffer, invite them to introduce themselves and ask for information such as how they came to work in the office or what issues they work on. The more you can hear from them first, the more you can tailor your ideas to them.

Influence Starts Immediately

"The meeting begins as soon as you walk through the door. Always, always, always be nice to the staff, and never talk about other offices or other officials, positive or negative. You're there to meet with these folks, and that's what you should be focused on. And the staffer at the front desk might be the person you're meeting with."

Dan Snedden, public policy manager, American Library Association **Step 2: Make Your Ask.** Because you might have limited time, be sure to be clear and concise about what you want the staffer or representative to do. This means speaking in plain language and avoiding acronyms and jargon, even if they're familiar in your day-to-day life. If there is a specific piece of legislation or other proposal you're meeting about, share the name or number of that as well so there's no confusion.

Put Your Bottom Line Up Front

"The biggest mistake people make is to not make it clear why they're there and what they're for or against. You should always have a bottom line — sharing something as simple as, 'This is what I want you to do,' or 'This is what I don't want you to do,' is essential."

Evan Liddiard, former US Senate staffer

Step 3: Share Why You Care. Make it clear to who you're meeting with about how you are affected personally about the issue. This can be one of the most compelling things you share in this meeting. A personal story will equip your representative or their staff to put a face and name to the issue you're engaged on. They want to know what's affecting their constituents, and this is your opportunity to share that.

Step 4: Discuss Your Issue. If you have time, you might have the opportunity to have a longer discussion about the issue you're meeting about. The person you're meeting with may not have a lot of background on the issue you're advocating for, so it's important to determine how much background information is helpful to share. You might also be asked questions; if you're asked about something and you're not sure about the answer, "I can follow up on that after the meeting" is the key phrase to remember — just make sure to actually follow through!

Step 5: Wrap Up the Meeting. When it's time to end the meeting, be sure to reiterate your ask. Make sure there are no questions about what action you want the office to take to resolve your concerns, and clarify any next steps that might be necessary. Before leaving, make sure you ask for the contact information of the person you're meeting with if you don't have it already. Also offer to share more information in the form of a leavebehind or one-pager — which is just a short document you can prepare beforehand that gives information on your issue and your ask. Finally, you might want to ask permission to take a photo (or screenshot if you're meeting virtually) of everyone in the meeting. You can use this to thank them publicly by posting on social media — and tagging your representative.

Step 6: Keep Your Momentum. Taking a meeting with a government official or their staff is not the end of your advocacy. It takes more than one meeting to build a relationship, and relationships help spur action on policy issues. Feel free to follow up on your meeting after a few days to thank them again, answer any questions you committed to following up on, and share supporting documents. After a few weeks or months, consider inviting the official or their staff to events a few months away that can showcase your issue and the importance of your ask.

Ending on a High Note

"Unfortunately, there are some offices that just don't respond to meeting requests. So from my view, just meeting with me is a reason to thank them."

Heather Parsons, VP of federal affairs,
American Occupational Therapy
Association

III. Impacting the Courts

Courts are another venue where advocates can have an impact. What happens in a courtroom can have large effects reaching beyond just the parties in a case. For example, issues like education spending and disability rights often find themselves the subjects of lawsuits from impacted groups.

Advocating to a court isn't as straightforward as it might be to talk to a mayor or state official — but it is still possible. There are two key paths that advocates take advantage of when trying to have an impact in the courtroom.

1. Pathway to Impact: Plaintiff in a Lawsuit

The first way you can consider using the courts to advance an issue you care about is by working with a lawyer to join an ongoing or pending court case, as a plaintiff. A plaintiff is a person who files a lawsuit against someone else seeking change. If you care about an issue where the law – or violations of it – may play a role, joining a lawsuit as a plaintiff can be a powerful way to make an impact.

Bolster a Lawsuit with Your Story

"I attended schools in Palo Alto for many years, and worked and volunteered at many organizations there. But because I wasn't a city resident, I was barred from entering the public grounds of Foothills Park. I thought it was time for the city to end its policy of exclusion and welcome all members of the surrounding community."

Laura Martinez

Martinez California Laura is а resident who, in 2020, joined a lawsuit to overturn Palo Alto's 55vear policy of keeping Foothills Park, a 1,400-acre nature preserve, open only to Palo Alto residents. The lawsuit, brought by residents of Palo Alto and other neighboring communities, claimed the policy was a legacy of racial discrimination. The lawsuit resulted in a settlement that allows any member of the public to visit the park without restriction.

This pathway can be difficult to navigate for anyone without a legal background. If you're considering this option in your own advocate work, take into account the following guidance:

- **Identify Your Opportunity.** This can mean doing background research to find out what policymakers are doing or what they're failing to do to comply with legal obligations.
- Find an Interested Lawyer. Lawyers with experience may be willing to take on your
 case for a fee, but many might be willing to work on your issue pro bono if there's a
 good opportunity to make a serious change. Pro bono lawyers can often be found at
 advocacy organizations like the ACLU, or through law school legal clinics, which
 specialize in particular issues.
- Document Your Experience. The biggest contribution that plaintiffs can make in
 advancing an issue through the legal process is by sharing their story of being
 impacted by the policy in question. So be prepared to arm lawyers with facts
 explaining just that such as your background, experience with the issue, and any
 ways in which the issue has uniquely shaped your life.

2. Pathway to Impact: Amicus in a Lawsuit

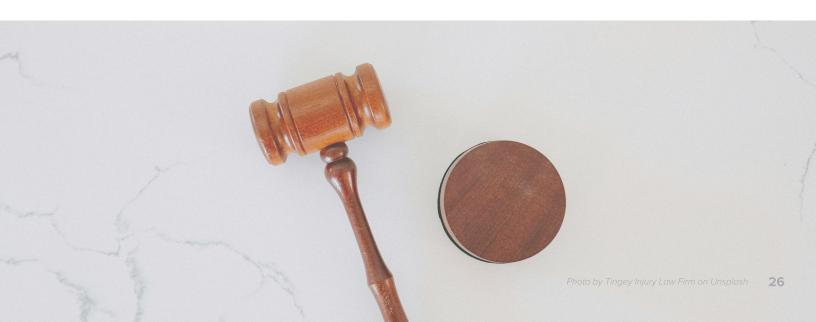
Another way to have an impact in the courtroom is by joining a case as an amicus, or a "friend of the court." An amicus is someone who isn't directly involved in a case, but has a strong interest in the outcome. The form impact takes as an amicus is often by filing an amicus brief, which is a legal document that provides the court with additional information, analysis, or perspectives that might be relevant to the case. These briefs are almost exclusively filed in the US Supreme Court or federal and state courts of appeals.

Similar to joining a lawsuit as a plaintiff, filing an amicus brief can be a challenging process to navigate without consulting an experienced lawyer. But if you're able to find an interested lawyer — either for a fee, or pro bono through an advocacy nonprofit or law school clinic — be ready to equip them with facts that the court doesn't already access to. This can include technical or scientific data, as well as information from your lived own professional experience that bear on a case.

Be a Friend of the Court

"An amicus brief is a great way to educate the court about things that might not come up in the normal course, like how a ruling might have an impact on people outside of the parties in a case. Sometimes what the parties are arguing for might be good for them but bad for you. A court could take those kinds of effects in mind when it crafts its decision."

Kate Huddleston, civil rights attorney



Conclusion

Playing a role in impacting the decisions governments make is an essential part of the democratic process. You help ensure that the government isn't just representative in name only, but that it reflects the needs of the people it's meant to serve.

Democracies ask more of their citizens than just voting. Maintaining a democracy requires us all to speak out, make ourselves heard, and work collaboratively to play a part in decisionmaking affecting our communities.

Play a Role in the Process

"Most people don't get elected by taking pleasure in disappointing people. They truly do want to find common ground."

G.T. Bynum, former mayor of Tulsa

We want everyone to play a part in this process. By reaching out to your representatives, speaking up at your city council meeting, or sharing your story with policymakers, legislators, or judges, you can not only influence policy, but also take a critical step in fostering cooperation and accountability in your community.

At a time when division and disconnection pose challenges to building public trust, it's more important than ever that individuals take part in the work of their communities. Regardless of where you live or who represents you, we hope you are encouraged to play a role in this process, flex our collective democratic muscle, and help us build stronger, healthier, and more representative communities nationwide.







About the Aspen Policy Academy

The Aspen Institute's Policy Academy helps community leaders and experts across the political spectrum elevate their voices, influence key decisions, and strengthen democracy from the ground up. Our innovative training programs and resources equip people across sectors – from tech to the environment, science to civic engagement – with the skills to shape critical policy efforts. Learn more at <u>aspenpolicyacademy.org</u>.