Introduction

Advocacy is critical to your mission.

It is vital that every affordable housing and community development organization play an active role in advocating for the issues that matter most to its mission, the people it serves, and its community. The key to this advocacy, however, is investing the time and resources necessary to build and sustain strong relationships with your Senators and Representatives.

Because your Members of Congress will be in their home districts and states, August Recess presents an excellent opportunity to jumpstart this process. By making full use of the times when your Senators and Representatives are at home, you can not only strengthen your relationships with them, but also show them first-hand how affordable housing and community development programs make a difference in their communities. There is no better way to turn a Member of Congress into a champion of the issues you care about!

In this toolkit, you will find three ways that you can start—or continue—to build relationships with your Members of Congress during the August Recess, including:

- Inviting your Senators and Representatives to visit your organization and learn why the work that you do is important to their district and how that work is supported by important federal programs;
- Meeting with your Senators and Representatives one-on-one at a district office; and
- Publishing an op-ed in your local media while your Members of Congress are in town.

If you have any questions or need assistance, please contact me directly at dyentel@enterprisecommunity.org.

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Invite Your Members Of Congress To Visit Your Organization

One of the most powerful things you can do to build relationships with your Senators and Representatives is invite them to visit your organization. You can make a lasting impression by showing them first-hand how your organization improves lives in your community and how you use federal programs to support your work.

Best Practices

There are a number of things you can do to increase the likelihood that your Senators and Representatives will accept your invitation to visit your organization:

- **Secure a date with your Members of Congress first.** Coordinate with schedulers and district offices and give them as much notice as possible. Offer a range of days and be flexible. It’s important to consider holidays, competing community events, weather, and the size of the event location.

- **Invite guests after you secure a date with your Members of Congress**, including people from other organizations involved in your work, as well as local officials, neighbors, and potential or current residents. Ideally, you should send out invitations three to four weeks in advance.

- **Maximize the value of the event by inviting media to attend.** Make sure your Members of Congress know about the media’s involvement in advance. Identify key messages that you want reporters to understand. Give media outlets one-week’s notice of the who, what, when, where, and why. Prepare a press release and make a staff member available on the day of the event to give quotes and answer questions.

- **Make the event photo-op ready.** Identify participants and tell them in advance of any photo-ops. Bring props, like hard hats and shovels or ribbon and large scissors, to help make a strong statement. Do you have a banner or sign with your logo that you can display?

- **Create opportunities** for your Members of Congress can speak to, and meet with, a significant number of constituents at the event.

- **Connect the dots.** You are not only showcasing your organization, but the federal programs that support your work. Tell your Representatives and Senators about the federal programs you rely on.

- **Put a human face on the work you do.** Personalize the experience by inviting a constituent who can share a personal story of how your organization has impacted their life.
Meet One-On-One With Your Members Of Congress

A one-on-one meeting with your Members of Congress or their staff to discuss the issues carries much more weight than signing a petition, sending a letter, or making a phone call.

Best Practices

There are a number of things you can do to prepare to ensure that these meetings are as productive as possible:

- **Do your homework.** Knowing their background, information about the committees they're on, and other positions they hold will be helpful in crafting a persuasive message. Try to make a direct connection between your advocacy efforts and what they care about.

- **Focus on only one or two critical issues.** Since time is limited, focus on the most important issues. Every additional issue that you raise will only overwhelm the staffer or dilute your message.

- **Know the issue well, but assume they are unfamiliar.** It is critical that you know the facts, figures, arguments, and counter-arguments surrounding the issue before your meeting. But avoid the temptation of using industry jargon or getting into the weeds.

- **Make it personal.** Share a real-life example of how your organization has benefitted voters in their state or district. Putting a human face on the work you do can often be more important than just numbers.

- **Remember to listen.** Finding out their views is just as important as conveying yours because it gives insight on how you can make your message more persuasive. Show genuine respect for any differences in opinion.

- **Be clear and ask for what you want.** Do not end your meeting without asking your Senators and Representatives to take specific action on your issue. How else will they know what they can do to help?

- **Say “thank you” at the start and end of your meeting.** Start your meeting by thanking your Member of Congress for any helpful action they may have taken. Regardless of the outcome, end your meeting by thanking your Senators and Representatives for the opportunity to meet and raise your concerns.

- **Follow up.** Send your Members of Congress and their staff an email to thank them for the meeting. Include any additional information in a clear and concise manner. Be sure to confirm any agreed-upon actions.
Publish An Op-Ed In Your Local Newspaper

Because Senators and Representatives pay close attention to local media outlets, pitching a news story or publishing an op-ed can be quite effective. Both approaches can help you get your message across to not only your Members of Congress, but the broader public as well.

Best Practices

The key to having your op-ed published is to make it timely and persuasive. Below are best practices that will help you hone your skills:

- **Make only one point well.** Media outlets are unlikely to publish op-eds that are not focused tightly on a single issue or idea.

- **Have a clear viewpoint.** Readers should know exactly where you stand in the first paragraph. Come down hard on one side of the issue.

- **Back up your argument with facts and figures.** After you outline your opinion, show readers how you got there with factual, researched, or first-hand information.

- **Lose the stuffed shirt.** News outlets only publish op-eds that they believe will be interesting to readers. Use everyday, conversational language and avoid industry jargon.

- **Timing is everything.** Be prepared to quickly submit your op-ed when the right opportunity arises. Draw a direct line between your op-ed and an event or story that is dominating the news. It is even better if their publication covered the news story!

- **Tailor your message to your community.** While your op-ed should relate to broad, national issues, be sure to highlight the impact on your community. Why should local readers care?

- **Use short and concise sentences** with as few words as possible. Remember, each newspaper has their own word limits, so check first.

- **Give a shout-out to your Members of Congress.** If they have been supportive of the issue, thank them for their leadership in the op-ed and forward a copy of the published op-ed to their office. They will appreciate the free advertising.