



## **Why lobby?**

Lobbying is a fancy way of saying that you want to tell your elected officials how you feel about something. Anyone can lobby and they should. These meetings are an effective way to get your views across to the people who make decisions and policies that affect your life.

During Congressional recesses and on weekends, many members of Congress return to their home district or state. This is a good opportunity to schedule an appointment with your federal senators or representative in their local office to discuss sentencing reform. District lobby meetings are a convenient way of reaching your lawmakers to let them know that you care about an issue. When your lawmaker “comes home” to the district you can use the opportunity to meet in person to educate them about sentencing reform and avenues for change

This is especially important if your members of Congress have a poor record on sentencing reform issues. During your visit you can educate them on the issue to show that there is public support among voters for reform and to put a human face on sentencing issues. If your members agree with you and have a good sentencing reform record, a personal visit is a great way to say thank you and be sure they know their constituents back them up.

Your members of Congress serve a number of different roles that allow them to be effective advocates for sentencing reform. They can:

- Author, support and/or vote for legislation calling for sentencing reform;
- Author or sign letters to their colleagues or the President requesting information on current policies and/or demanding change; and
- Be a public advocate for sentencing reform.



## **A little about Congress**

### **How many members of Congress are there?**

There are 535 members of Congress: 435 representatives in the House, and 100 senators in the Senate. The Vice President can vote in the Senate in the event of a tie but does not represent a state.

### **How often are representatives and senators up for reelection?**

All 435 representatives are up for election every two years in even numbered years. Senators are elected for six-year terms. Unlike the House of Representatives, where everyone is up for reelection at the same time, every two years about 1/3 of the senators are up for reelection.

### **What is a constituent?**

You are a constituent. Who represents you in the House and the Senate is determined by where you live. The people that a Congressperson is elected to represent are called their “constituents” or “constituency.” You must be a citizen of the United States to be considered a constituent.

### **How many bills are introduced every year?**

In the 109th Congress (from 2005-2006) there were 6,436 bills introduced in the House of Representatives, but only 316 bills were passed by both the House and Senate and signed by the president to become law. In addition, another 1,716 resolutions were introduced. The huge number is one more reason to make your views known about the ones that matter to you. If you let them know you pay attention to the bills that matter to you, it will encourage them to do so as well.



## **Tips for an effective meeting with lawmakers**

**BE WELL-INFORMED:** Lawmakers are often pressed for time, so it is important to know the key points you must get across. Don't hesitate to refer to written material to help stay on track. You should also be well-informed about the lawmaker who you are meeting with. If the lawmaker is good on any issue you've been involved in or has supported a position you've taken in the past, be sure to acknowledge your appreciation during the course of the visit.

**BE STRATEGIC:** If you are going with a group to meet your lawmaker, aim for three to five participants. More than five participants can lower the effectiveness of your meeting. Think about who you want to attend the meeting so that your voices complement each other. The most effective participants are individuals who have family members who are or were in prison, formerly incarcerated people, practitioners in the justice system (including lawyers and police), community representatives (including clergy or humanitarian leaders) and those who may have ties with the representative or senator. If there is a point of tension within your group about a substantive issue, agree ahead of time not to debate that point in the meeting. Try to focus on those issues that the group can readily agree on. At the meeting, do not bring up issues that are not sentencing related. It is best stay focused on your main message.

**BE PROMPT AND PATIENT:** Arrive on time, but be patient if you have to wait. Lawmakers have busy schedules and can't control sessions or meetings that run overtime. You may be told that the lawmaker is unable to meet with you at the last moment and be asked to meet with a staff member. **Do not underestimate the power of legislative staff!** They may be the ones doing all the follow-up work on the issue and will be your primary contact. You want to convince them too. Like legislators, staff have limited time. Follow the tips on this page for a successful meeting.

**BE POLITE:** Begin your comments by thanking the lawmaker for meeting with you. If you are in a group, each person should introduce themselves at the beginning of the meeting and thank the lawmaker at the end of the meeting. If you are meeting with staff, show them the same respect so you can establish a good relationship with the lawmaker's staff. Be sure the staff knows they can count on you as a resource.

**BE BRIEF AND POSITIVE:** If you are attending the meeting as part of a group, designate a spokesperson to present the group's message. The spokesperson should leave his or her name and address, so the lawmaker or staff member can follow-up with questions if necessary. Others in the group should introduce themselves and explain very briefly how they are personally affected. Meetings should last no longer than necessary, hopefully between 10 to 30 minutes. Leave on time, unless the lawmaker clearly requests that you stay. Staying positive and on point creates a great image.



**BE PERSONAL:** Share your story in two minutes or less with your elected official. Bring pictures of your family member in prison. Let the elected official know that, while you are not meeting with him or her to ask for help with your loved one's case, this issue affects you and hundreds and thousands of people just like you. It is important to put a face on sentencing reform.

**ANTICIPATE TOUGH ARGUMENTS AND QUESTIONS:** Be prepared to answer questions. Make a good case, but don't exaggerate. If you don't know the answer to a question, admit it and tell them you will answer it as soon as you can. Being right is more important than answering a question immediately.

**ASK FOR YOUR LAWMAKER'S VIEWPOINT:** Then listen to his or her answer carefully. Concentrate on what he or she says. Don't interrupt. Ask clarifying questions, if necessary. Offer to supply additional information – part of your effort is to educate.

**DON'T ARGUE:** If a lawmaker disagrees with you, **stay calm**. Once you've disagreed and stated why, continuing an argument will not help. For example, say, "I see that we disagree on this point, Representative \_\_\_\_\_, but I appreciate your willingness to consider my views." Never threaten by saying things like "I'll never vote for you" or "I pay your salary."

**STICK TO THE POINT:** Don't ask or expect your lawmaker to help in a particular case or personal matter. Do not bring up other legislative issues during this appointment. Know what subject you are going to address, sticking to no more than one or two issues. You should also know what you would like to get out of the visit before you go in, i.e., a commitment to vote for your issue, leadership on the issue, or you may decide the visit is simply informational. Be very clear and let the lawmaker know exactly what you want him or her to do. If the meeting is educational, say so.

**FOLLOW-UP:** One of the most important parts of a meeting is what happens afterwards. There are a few steps you can take to help build a relationship with the office:

1. During the meeting, ask for a specific staff member to serve as a point of contact and get information for that person.
2. Set up a time to contact staff (e.g. two weeks after the meeting) to follow-up on your requests. For example, if you asked a lawmaker to consider cosponsoring legislation, call the staff and ask if the lawmaker has had the opportunity to give the bill his or her consideration.
3. Send a thank you note. Thank you notes can be as simple as an email, but letter and cards are always nice and effective, particularly if you need to send additional information to the legislator. Remember, you are meeting with the office to build a relationship.
4. Consider inviting your lawmaker to speak at any local meetings, church gatherings or other events discussing sentencing reform. Think about ways to keep him or her engaged.



## How to schedule a meeting

**IDENTIFY YOUR FEDERAL LEGISLATORS:** You can do this by going to by going to:

- [www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org) and type in your zip code;
- [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) and selecting “senators”;
- [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and entering your zip code in the box at the top of the page; or
- [www.famm.org](http://www.famm.org) and selecting “take action” and using the “find your officials” function.

**CALL THE DISTRICT OFFICE CLOSEST TO YOU:** You can meet with your legislator in D.C. or in the district office.

*Meeting in Washington, D.C.:* If you are in Washington D.C., please call FAMM (202) 822-6700. We will be happy to help you set up and prepare for a meeting.

*In-District Meeting:* If you would like to meet with your lawmaker near your home, call his/her nearest district office (listed on the lawmaker’s website) and ask to speak to the scheduler. The scheduler may ask you to send or fax a meeting request letter. If so, you can use the sample request below. If you need additional help setting up a meeting, please call FAMM (202) 822-6700. We will be happy to help you.

[your name, address, and phone number]

[Date of letter]

The Honorable [First name of legislator] [Last name of legislator]

Atten: [Name of scheduler]

U.S. House of Representatives [or U.S. Senate]

Washington, D.C. [Zipcode is 20510 for the Senate, 20515 for the House]

Dear Representative [or Senator] [Last name]:

I am your constituent and a member of Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM.) I am following up on a conversation with [name of scheduler] to meet with you]in your [name of city where district office is located] office to discuss sentencing reform issues. [If you are meeting on a specific issue, for example crack cocaine or methamphetamine sentencing, mention that here.] I will be joined by [list of individuals who will be joining you and organizational affiliation if any].

The best dates for me to meet are [fill in several dates and/or times].

I will contact you shortly regarding the possibility of scheduling this meeting. In the meantime, you can contact me at [phone number] or [email] if you have any questions.

Sincerely,  
[Signature]



**FOLLOW-UP:** You will often have to call the scheduler a second time to set a meeting. You can use the sample script below if guide your conversation with your lawmaker's staff members.

“Hi, my name is [your name]. I would like to speak to [scheduler's name].

*Wait to be transferred*

I am following up on my earlier [fax or letter] sent on [insert date here] requesting a district meeting with [Senator/Representative] [insert name here] to talk about sentencing reform. There would be about [x#] of us attending this meeting. Did your office receive the meeting request that we sent?

Good! When would be the best time for [Senator/Representative] [name] to meet?

[Set the meeting time]

Thank you for your time and I look forward to meeting with you and [Senator/Representative] [name] on [date of your meeting and time].”

**TIP:** Ask for the aide's email address. At the end of the call send a confirmation email of the time and date of your meeting. You may also want to call a day in advance of your meeting to confirm the date and time.

**TIP:** After your second call if you still haven't received a response, try once again to schedule your appointment. Be respectful but persistent.

**TIP:** If you are asked to leave a message, give your name and a number where you can be reached. Make sure to say that you have already sent in a letter requesting a meeting. Also mention that you will follow-up with another call.



**TIME LINE:**

**Four weeks out:** Decide who, if anyone, will be going to the meeting with you. Identify your lawmaker and his or her office.

**Three weeks out:** Call and schedule a meeting.

**One/two weeks out:** Prepare for your meeting. Write down and practice talking points. Gather any materials you would like to leave for your member of Congress.

**Day before the meeting:** Confirm your meeting with the office.

**Day of the meeting:** If you are meeting with a group, decide who the main spokesperson is going to be. After the meeting, compare notes with others who were in the meeting and write down what was accomplished. Never make assumptions that a lawmaker is going to do something unless he or she says explicitly that they will take a specific action. Share your meeting results with FAMM by emailing [jstitt@famm.org](mailto:jstitt@famm.org). Knowing what arguments you used and how the meeting went helps us make our national lobbying efforts that much stronger. Finally, each person who took part in the meeting should send a personal thank you letter to the elected official.

**FOLLOW UP:** If you offered to provide additional information, try to do so in the days following the meeting. If the elected official doesn't meet the deadline for action you agreed to during the meeting, ask him or her to set another deadline. Be polite, persistent and flexible.