

A GUIDE TO CHILDREN AND EMERGENCIES ADVOCACY: CHECKLIST FOR A CONGRESSIONAL VISIT

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Photo Credit: Save the Children

Preplanning

- Develop a plan for what you would like to discuss, who you would like to attend and your talking points regarding preparedness funding and key legislation for children and emergencies.
- Identify, recruit and engage a local champion to bring a voice of community support as you meet with your member of Congress.
- Determine if want to invite local media to attend.
- Review talking points to help prepare you to discuss important issues, tell a story and make an ask with your elected officials.
- Develop an agenda to make sure you maximize your time with your elected official.

Invitations

- Use template to develop an invitation letter for your member of Congress or a staff person.
- Call the office and ask for the scheduler. Tell him/her you would like to send an invitation and ask the best way to send.
- Send the invitations and confirm RSVPs.

Conduct the Visit

- Coordinate with internal staff the day before the visit.
- Prepare a one-page document telling your community's preparedness story and be sure to include basic facts, statistics, and local impact.
- Review talking points to help prepare you to discuss important issues with your elected officials.
- Review the plan to ensure all timeframes are reasonable and to develop contingency plans (if necessary).
- Assign a person the task of taking pictures during the visit as well as to take notes about what the elected official or staff person expressed the most interest in.

Follow-Up

- Send a "thank you" letter and pictures to the elected official's office.
- Follow-up with congressional staff on any questions raised with additional information.
- Follow-up on any potential media inquiries (after working with the elected official's office).
- Report back to us about how the visit went.
- Consider asking the elected official to submit a statement for the Congressional Record about the visit.

The Do's and Don'ts for Your Meeting with Your Elected Officials

When meeting with legislators and candidates, these tips will help you maximize the impact of your message and make the most of every minute you spend with elected officials and those seeking office. And make sure you avoid easy pitfalls that could threaten a positive meeting.

Do:

- Develop talking points before the meeting to make certain you stay on message
- Clearly identify yourself as a constituent
- Ask for specific legislative action or support
- Provide reliable data or fact sheets
- Be positive and friendly
- Be sensitive about time since meetings are often cut short
- Treat staff with the same level of respect as you do the official
- Compliment the member or staff on positive actions
- Admit if you don't know an answer, but promise to follow up
- Leave your name and contact information
- Send a thank you note
- Follow-up with any additional information needed

Don't:

- Arrive without an appointment
- Be late
- Miss a valuable opportunity to meet with staff members if your legislator is unable to keep your appointment or cuts your time short
- Be confrontational or partisan
- Try to discuss more than one issue
- Get unprofessionally comfortable or casual
- Forget to use proper forms of address

Frequently Asked Questions about Congressional Visits

When's the best time to schedule a visit?

One of the many congressional recesses is an ideal time to schedule an in-district event or meeting. During a session, members usually are in Washington three days a week (Tuesday through Thursday), but Monday and Friday may also have scheduled votes. Note that even when they are home, they have many public, private and personal demands on their time. Try to work your congressional visit around one of the frequent recesses ("home-district work sessions"). They generally occur during the following 12 holiday periods:

- Martin Luther King, Jr., Day (mid-January)
- Presidents' Day (mid-February)
- Easter/Passover (March or April)
- Memorial Day (late May)
- Independence Day (July 4)
- August Recess (August through the week after Labor Day)
- Rosh Hashanah (one day occurring in late September or early October)
- Yom Kippur (one day occurring 10 days after Rosh Hashanah)
- Columbus Day (early October)
- Veterans' Day (early November)
- Thanksgiving (usually at least one week in late November, if session has not formally adjourned)
- Christmas (generally, the first session of Congress has adjourned for the month of December and will reconvene after New Year's Day)

What do I do if my elected official is not available for the dates I offer?

When inviting a legislator for an in-district event or meeting, be flexible. Allow for several options. If your choices are still inconvenient, ask the legislator to suggest a date. Don't become discouraged if you are turned down the first time. Rejections do not reflect on you, personally, but rather reflect the chaotic nature of a legislator's schedule. If a date is set, be prepared for last-minute alterations that may be due to unexpectedly long sessions or unpredictable travel delays.

Which members of Congress should I invite to an in-district event or meeting and who should attend?

Members of Congress are elected to represent everyone in the district or state. Do not invite just those officials who share one political ideology. After all, your intent is to develop a good rapport with public officials. It is best to have strong contacts in both parties.

Frequently Asked Questions about Congressional Visits

Do I invite media to attend?

Once you invite a member for an in-district event or meeting, remember you can opt to make this a public event. Members of Congress like positive press coverage and will be more inclined to attend events with media involved. Certainly, the large news media in your area should be contacted, but don't forget about the local weeklies. Each will be inclined to cover your event, if given appropriate notice. When a short-staffed weekly cannot provide coverage, offer to provide it yourself, with your own report and photos.

What should I talk about during the in-district event or meeting?

You have an important story to tell, so prepare specific answers to expected questions, particularly about the impact your work has on preparing children for emergencies in your lawmaker's district. But try not to reveal all of this information at once. Rather, spread it out during the congressional visit to make the visit both interesting and informative. When developing your presentation, work in the following information:

- **Success stories.** Discuss how your efforts have helped children prepare for emergencies and helped your local community.
- **Past Emergencies.** Describe if your community has been impacted by a disaster (small or large) and the impact they have on your community.
- **Statistics.** Discuss key statistics regarding children and emergencies and tie it back to your local communities.



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Suggested Talking Points – Policy Roundtable Discussion

You have an important story to tell, so prepare specific answers to expected questions, particularly about the impact your work has on preparing children for emergencies in your lawmaker’s district. But try not to reveal all of this information at once. Rather, spread it out during the congressional visit to make the visit both interesting and informative.

Below are some suggested talking points but you don’t need to memorize this or use it word for word – this should come from the heart. You know your local communities and the work you are doing to help children in emergencies. Tell stories and pick the statistics that relate most closely to your experiences. We suggest that you also practice saying it in our own words and add in your own stories if you’ve been affected by disaster or are worried for children’s safety.

Funding is a common ask of Congress, and should be included where appropriate. But funding is also one of the most common requests and can be difficult to pass. Also, think of other kinds of requests that could benefit the community by unlocking existing resources [add example], or otherwise positively influence the ability to meet the needs of children in a disaster.

Introductions:

- Hello, and welcome to all of you. I am [insert name, title].
- We are thrilled to have [Representative/Senator] here today with us. Congressman/Senator, we are grateful for your time.
- I would like to take a few minutes to allow everyone to introduce themselves.
- Thank you for your comments and for attending this meeting.

Talking Points:

- Children deserve our best. We have a responsibility to make [insert] a safe and resilient community for our kids. We cannot wait for a disaster to find out if our community is prepared.
- Children have unique needs that we understand and cater to in the quality programs we deliver.
- While we cannot prevent disasters from happening, we can take action so that when they strike, the [insert] community will be ready and children can be safe.
- Our resilience and ability to rebound from a crisis can be measured by our capacity to care for our children, who are among the most vulnerable in an emergency. Their physical safety, emotional wellbeing and their long-term development all can be severely impacted by disaster. [insert any local disaster examples, if relevant]
- Protecting children in disasters is a community effort, requiring the cooperation and coordination of multiple sectors- including, schools, child care providers, health care systems, emergency management and local government.
- It’s critical that communities do everything they can to protect their youngest residents, well before the worst happens. This project is all about empowering communities to better understand what kind of actions they can now take to protect children from future harm.

Why it Important:

This unfinished agenda and potential loss of funding highlights just how vulnerable America's children still are to a disaster. We ask that you also consider:

- **Natural disasters are happening more frequently and more types of disasters affect the US than any other nation.** [Insert local area examples]
- Man-made disasters can also strike without warning, anywhere and at any time.
- Every working day in the U.S., some 70 million children are out of their homes in child care, early education programs and schools. The lack of reunification planning puts many of these girls and boys at grave risk. **If there was a rapid-onset event that occurred during the business day, such as an earthquake or an act of terror, thousands many children could be separated from their families.**
- Another major gap is the lack of communication and coordination between child-serving institutions and emergency management – **leading to misunderstanding and diffused responsibility for children in emergencies.**
- There is a critical lack of mental health and emotional recovery programs for children following a disaster. **Long-term studies by Columbia University of children who were directly affected by Hurricane Katrina, for example, found that they were five times as likely to have serious emotional disturbances as children who were not directly affected.**

The Ask

- [Discuss funding climate and potential reductions to meeting the needs of children in disasters]. **Please support robust funding for FEMA and increased funding for children and disasters.**

Remarks from Representative or Senator

- We may all believe that what goes on in Washington has the potential to affect all of us here in [insert city, state] (and it does), but we also know that what happens here in our local community drives the decisions made in the halls of Congress.
- Representative/ Senator [insert], we would appreciate your perspective on the current political landscape and your thoughts on preparedness federal funding for programs [insert other asks as well]

Concluding Remarks

- The RCRC Initiative shows that everyone, from caregivers, to parents, to health professionals, has a role to play in building children's resilience. [INSERT LESSONS ALREADY LEARNED/GAPS]
- Recent U.S. emergencies continue to demonstrate how critical community coordination and ownership is to building resilience. Together, through the RCRC initiative, we are mobilizing coalitions, sharing best practices and looking out for the needs of children, so that when the next disaster strikes we can help ensure that communities will be ready and children will be safe.
- Making real and lasting change for children in disasters requires advocacy and prioritization on national scale.
- We have some time left if there are any additional questions or comments.

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- Thank you everyone for your time and to you, Representative/Senator [insert], for being with us here today.
 - I hope you will feel free to call upon us if we can be of assistance on the issues facing children in emergencies.
 - [Prepare to adjourn]

In addition, if you are meeting with a Senator, we encourage you to also speak on current children and emergencies legislation:

- Annual appropriations bills [elaborate]
- Authorization bills [elaborate]
- Other kinds of legislation?