



Hill Day Advocacy: How to Conduct a Legislative Meeting

What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is communicating with elected officials to help them understand how they may better assist the people and communities they represent. Everyone residing in the 50 states has elected officials in Congress: two Senators and one House Representative. Most of these legislators have direct experience with mental health conditions at some point in their lives and genuinely want to do something positive to make it easier for people to live and thrive. But individuals and groups must participate in the legislative process to ensure key mental health-related concerns do not fall to other priorities and go unresolved.

Conducting a Legislative Meeting

To best prepare before a legislative meeting:

1. Research any actions the legislator has taken on mental health.
2. Write down a list of points that you want to make sure the legislator knows and practice saying them aloud. Note: tips for telling your story are in the next section.

In the meeting:

3. Start by introducing yourself by name, hometown, and role in the community or with your organization. Allow others in the meeting to do the same.
4. Thank the legislative office for a vote or action you appreciated. Building a rapport is important in developing a long-term relationship, and compliments go a long way.
5. Tell your story concisely. Be sure to focus on one topic. It is important to talk about only one or two issues max and to stay on this topic during the meeting. Avoid a long philosophical debate about the issue, always.
6. Allow others in your group to tell their story. For large groups, designate speakers in advance. Ensure those who want to speak do so and leave time at the end for questions from the legislator or their staff.
7. Make the “ask.” Our 2022 Hill Day asks are:
 - a. Funding SAMHSA’s Community Mental Health Services Block Grant at \$1.5 billion with a 20% set aside for prevention-only activities.
 - b. Creation of a new coordinating center at the CDC for adolescent mental health funded at \$25 million annually.
6. At the end of the meeting, thank the legislator for their time. Legislative offices are very fast-paced and often thankless jobs. Showing appreciation can go a long way, even if a person is not having their best day.

After the meeting:

7. Send a thank you note or email soon after the meeting to repeat your “ask” from the meeting. If you are part of a larger organization, offer to provide subject matter expertise, invite them to join your newsletter, and offer a tour of your facilities – either virtually or when it is safe to meet in person. The thank you should offer a way to keep the conversation going beyond the meeting.
8. Feel free to follow up after some time has passed to check in on progress toward the “asks” you made. This keeps the issue at the top of mind for the legislator or their staff and can serve as a reminder for them to work on the issue if action has not already been taken to move it forward.

Telling Your Story

Policymakers may know the high-level framework of the current mental health system – but they often need a story to understand how COVID-19 continues to affect individuals and organizations on the ground. By sharing your personal experience or the experiences of others in your community, you will provide invaluable information to inform decision-making. A few tips for storytelling:

1. Take time to think about experiences or situations that demonstrate current system failures.
2. Craft a brief story about these experiences that connect all the dots and describe why it is personal for you.
3. Keep your story concise: between 30 seconds and two minutes. In writing, that would be 1-2 paragraphs.
4. Suggest one or two specific changes in an “ask” at the end of the story. The action must be concrete, measurable, and related to legislation, funding, or executive action.

About Mental Health America: MHA is the nation’s leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and promoting the overall mental health of all. MHA’s national office and its state and local affiliates are driven by a commitment to promote mental health as a critical part of overall wellness, including prevention services for all; early identification and intervention for those at risk; integrated care, services, and supports for those who need them; with recovery as the goal.

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