

ARVO Outreach Tools

How to advocate for vision research on Capitol Hill



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Introduction

This guide describes how to prepare for meeting your representatives on Capitol Hill. While the guide is written with a visit to Washington, D.C. in mind, it can also be used to prepare for visits with Congressional staff in your district or to state capitals. International members may find suggestions more appropriate for their government and culture in the [International Advocacy Handbook](#).

Prerequisites

To participate in a visit to Capitol Hill, members will need the following:

1. One to two days for travel and the visits themselves.
2. A budget for travel, food and lodging (if staying overnight before or after the meetings).
3. A reason to speak to your legislators!

1. Before your visit

1.1 Know your goal

As the primary funder of basic R&D in the U.S., the federal government plays a huge role in supporting ARVO members. Are you interested in increasing the number of dollars going toward vision research? Is there an upcoming piece of legislation that would have a serious effect on your projects or practice? With ARVO's help, identify a goal and ensure all your preparation supports it.

1.2 Know your legislators

Legislators only meet with their constituents (people who live in the district they represent). ARVO will identify and provide brief biographies of the [two senators](#) and [one representative](#) that serve as your voice in Congress. Through the biographies, learn which [committees](#) your [representatives](#) sit on. If your legislators sit on a committee that deals with a specific bill, they will have a better chance of changing that bill to be better aligned with your goal. Also, learn where your representatives stand on the issues that matter to you. If they agree with you, then you'll have an easy meeting. If they disagree, you'll have to know why and be prepared to make your case.

1.3 Know your audience

Your elected representatives and their staff are not scientists. They probably don't know the difference between the cornea and the retina, an optometrist and an ophthalmologist, or

glaucoma and macular degeneration. This doesn't mean they're dumb — they're just specialists in a different field of study (policy and politics). So, you can't speak to them using the same technical language you use with your peers in the lab or clinic. When preparing your talking points for the meeting (see below), be ready to communicate with layperson-friendly language.

1.4 Know your relationship

Chances are your institution/employer has worked with your legislators in the past. Learn what you can about that relationship from your institution's government relations office so you can mention and build upon it during your visit.

2. During your visit to Capitol Hill

2.1 What should you wear and bring?

Business attire is expected while on Capitol Hill. For men, that means a jacket and tie. For women, a suit (blazer/slacks/skirt) is appropriate. When in doubt, err on the conservative side. Bring plenty of business cards and copies of your department newsletter to leave behind.

2.2 What should you expect?

The first thing to expect is security. Visiting Capitol Hill involves going through an airport-like security screening. Be prepared to take everything out of your pockets and have your bags/purse scanned through an x-ray machine. Pocketknives, firearms or other weapons are prohibited. Second, your legislators and their staff are exceptionally busy. Your meeting time may start late, end early or be shifted multiple times to better accommodate their needs. Be flexible and respectful. Third, expect a staff member to meet you. Staffers have their boss's ear and report on all the meetings they have with constituents. Treat them with as much respect as you would give your legislator. Finally, arrive at the office 5 – 10 minutes early and let the staffer at the front desk know you've arrived. Do not be late.

3. During your meeting

3.1 General points

Legislators and their staff meet multiple times a day with constituents. These meetings can very easily blur together or be forgotten completely in the bustle of their other responsibilities. To have your message be successfully delivered — and remembered after you are gone — strive to be clear and concise while offering unique stories and valuable information.

Also, do not stray from your message. Other issues like taxes, medical practice and immigration are important, but not during a meeting about vision research. If you really want to share your opinion about another policy area important to you, ask the staffer or legislator you're visiting for a minute after the meeting to communicate your personal thoughts privately.

3.2 Share who you are and what you do

The first step of every meeting is to introduce yourself. Give your name, the town you live in, job title and describe your work. Again, it is extremely important to be clear (no jargon) and concise ([no more than two sentences](#)) in your introduction. If you lose the interest of the staffer by being too scientific or longwinded, your message will likely be lost as well.

3.3 Explain why you're visiting

After the introductions, it's typical to get right to the reason why you're visiting. Whether you're asking for increased funding for vision research, or a vote for/against a certain piece of legislation, state the goal of your visit early in the meeting.

3.4 Describe the impact

Explain how upcoming policy decisions will directly affect you, your peers, your employees/employer and your community. Be explicit about potential negative consequences, but also share examples of past successes, such as medical breakthroughs, training the next generation of scientists and community outreach. ARVO will supply talking points (facts, figures, sound bites) to support your position.

3.5 Listen

Once you make your case, listen carefully to what the staffer or legislator has to say. To what part of your explanation did they respond? Did they make any commitments? If they ask questions, answer them concisely if you can, or offer to contact them later with the information if you cannot. Take a few notes so you can share the highlights of the conversation with ARVO and incorporate them in your "thank you" email/letter.

3.6 Make an offer

Politicians like visiting their constituents where they live or work. Near the end of the meeting, invite the representative or staffer to visit your institution or attend an upcoming vision research outreach event.

Such a visit would be a great way to build upon the relationship you've established, as well as further educate your legislator about your work.

3.7 Get a picture

At the end of the meeting, be sure to take a picture with the staffer or legislator. These are not only fun for you to share with your friends and coworkers, but important for ARVO to document the event and share with other members.

4. When you return home

4.1 Send a thank you

Using a format provided to you by ARVO, email the offices you visited to say thank you, reiterate the talking points you made and the offer to visit your institution/employer.

4.2 Expect follow-up articles

ARVO staff will follow-up on the visit by asking for your thoughts on the experience and quotes for articles to be shared with the ARVO membership. Your contributions are crucial for improving Advocacy Day for the next participants and spreading the word about the valuable opportunity.