Virtual Lobby Visits 101

Unfortunately, given COVID-19, we can't plan traditional lobby visits. But that doesn't mean we can't make our voices heard! This overview has all the information you need to plan a successful virtual lobby visit on any issue.

Schedule a Virtual Lobby Visit

A virtual meeting has the advantage of greater accessibility for leaders and advocates since there is no travel required.

The process to set up a virtual lobby visit is nearly identical to setting up an in-person meeting. First, call your lawmaker's office. Explain who you are, what organization you are with (the Northwest Community Bail Fund), that you are a constituent, and that you would like to meet with the senator or representative to discuss the issue. Ask to whom the meeting request email should be sent, and get their email address. Then, send a formal email requesting a meeting with the member of the Legislature and/or their staff (sample email below). Include in the request how the meeting will take place (i.e. which technology platform) and the topic(s) you would like to cover. If you do not hear back in a few days, send a reminder email or call the office again. You can also use district staff for assistance, especially if there is someone in the office with whom you have a relationship. Remember, if the member of the Legislature is unavailable, always request to meet with the staff member who works on the issue.

The big difference between an in-person and virtual lobby visit is technology, i.e. how the visit will take place. Some offices allow Zoom (video conference call) and some allow a free conference call line; others will provide their own technology or call-in information. A productive meeting can happen regardless of technology, but it is one additional step to iron out when planning a virtual lobby visit. Options for holding a remote meeting include setting up an account with freeconferencecall.com, Zoom, Google Hangouts, or any platform with which

you are familiar. Note: all of these platforms offer free options that will suffice for a lobby visit. Make sure all participants have access to your meeting link or conference line prior to the meeting.

Sample Email to Request a Virtual Lobby Visit

Dear [Name],

My name is [name] and I am a Northwest Community Bail Fund advocate and a constituent of [Senator X / Representative X]. I would like to request a virtual appointment with the [Senator / Representative] on [date and time] to talk about [issue]. If the [Senator / Representative] is unavailable, I would like to meet with the appropriate staff member who covers this issue. I can provide a Zoom link or conference call line for this meeting; please let me know what technology your office prefers. I expect to be joined by [X] people.

Please feel free to contact me at [phone number and email] should you have any questions. I look forward to this "virtual" visit!

Thank you,
[Name]
Northwest Community Bail Fund Advocate
[Email Address]
[Phone Number]

If you successfully schedule a virtual visit weeks in advance, follow up with the office a few days before the meeting to confirm the time and technology you plan to use. Also, if the number of people attending the visit changes over time, keep the staff person informed. Some staff request a list of attendees prior to the meeting.

Prepare for a Virtual Lobby Visit

Share issue briefing materials with those attending the meeting. Last, hold a meeting in advance of the visit to decide roles and responsibilities, brainstorm personal stories relevant to the issue, and practice making the ask. The key to a successful lobby visit is preparation!

Tip: You do not need to know all the answers! If asked a question during the meeting you cannot answer, do not make up the answer. Say you will get back

to them with the information they need. This keeps your relationship authentic and ongoing.

Hold a Virtual Lobby Visit

Virtual lobby visits have the same components of in-person visits, but can be slightly more challenging because it is more difficult to read body language when not in person.

- Start the meeting with introductions, including name, organization, and pronouns.

  Tip: Have fun! You are building relationships and sharing your passions on issues you care about.

- After introductions, talk about the issue you came to address and make "the ask", i.e. what you want the lawmaker to do (cosponsor a bill, vote NO, speak out on the House floor, etc.). Consider adding a personal story to drive home why you care about this issue.

- Ask questions and listen to the answers! Hear what your lawmaker or their staff has to say about your ask, and note any follow-up questions or materials they need. It is easier to speak over another person when meeting virtually. Be aware of this tendency and make sure you create space for the member of Congress or staff member to speak. At the end of the meeting, say thank you and reiterate any next steps.

  Tip: Focus the conversation on the issue at hand. The lawmaker or staff may bring up other policy issues or the upcoming election, which can take your meeting off-course or beyond the boundaries of what is 501(c)(3) compliant.

Check out the following handy guide for language that can be used to pivot the conversation back to your issue on the next page.

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HARD QUESTIONS & PIVOTING

We come across questions that catch us off guard all the time. The good news is that there are techniques to pivot back to our original point and keep the conversation on track. Here are some best practices and potential frameworks when responding to tough questions.

Personal Stories: Personal stories can help us humanize the issues we work on and can be interwoven in the pivoting models outlined below. When using personal stories in your advocacy work, they should demonstrate the following:

- Vulnerability
- Honesty
- Respect
- Faith values

AAR (Acknowledge, Answer, Redirect) Model: Use this model when responding to difficult, yet sincere questions. If you're not sure how to answer something, try the AAR model.

- **Acknowledge:** Demonstrate understanding or empathy with what the person is saying
- **Answer:** Answer their questions in a straightforward & short way. If you don't know the answer, that's okay! Tell them you'll find out and get back to them
- **Redirect:** Refocus back to your main points of conversation

Example:
Question: How are you going to make sure women don't use abortion as birth control? Answer: (acknowledge) I can hear this issue is important to you. (Answer) When it comes down to it, we know that the vast majority of people seeking abortions do not use it as contraceptive. (Redirect) It's important that we ensure all people can access safe and affordable reproductive care, including abortion, if we want healthy communities, and this legislation will do that.

FFF (Feel, Felt, Found) Model: Use this model when responding to someone who shares similar values with you, but their actions don't align with their words.

- **Feel:** Show empathy & understanding for where they are right now

- **Felt:** Connect by sharing a past personal experience that demonstrates a similar feeling that they're currently feeling
- **Found:** Share how taking action has changed your perspective and how you now feel differently now from how you did in the past.

Example:
Question: I'm just unsure, how could we possibly have any control over the courts?
Answer: (Feel) I get that, sometimes the courts feel very removed from our lives. (Felt) In fact, I was hesitant to get involved in organizing around the courts at first too. (Found) I have found that by educating the public and talking to our senators/representatives, we can have a huge impact on judicial nominations and really shape what our judicial system looks like.

Responding to "Whataboutism": Use this approach when someone asks you an insincere question that is intended to derail the conversation. Typically these questions start with "but what about…"

- Personal story contrary to concern
    - Share a personal story that illustrates the exact opposite of their point
    - If you don't have one personal to you, share a story from someone else (with their permission)

- Acknowledge concern
    - Acknowledge but do not legitimize their concern - there is a big difference between "I hear that you have a concern" and "I understand why you're concerned"

- Pivot back to main point
    - "I hear that you're concerned, but it's really important that we stay focused on…"
    - "I know you want to talk about ___, but we came here to discuss___"
    - "It's critical that we stay focused on…"
    - "I want to get back to why we're here today, which is…"

Example:
Question: What about the women who make false harassment accusations?
Answer: *(Personal story)* I've met a lot of women who've faced sexual harassment and not a single case was false. In fact, most women I know are so fearful of retaliation that they never report. *(Acknowledge concern)* I can hear that this is something you are concerned about, *(Pivot back)* but it's important that we stick to the facts and talk about how to prevent sexual harassment.