

Making the Most of District Days

While our elected representatives are working hard in the capital city, we and our foundations are changing lives, strengthening nonprofits, and enhancing communities back home. Policy makers will not know all the good we do unless we tell our story. District days -- the time when our representatives are back in the home district -- present a great opportunity to get to know elected officials and to help them understand our important work.

What's Our Goal?

District days offer the chance to strengthen relations with elected officials and Capitol staff who may not be very familiar with the home turf. Whether we engage our trustees or staff to develop or reinforce ties, it is important, think carefully about what we hope to accomplish. Is it:

- * to increase appreciation of the foundation's work,
- * to garner respect for your staff's knowledge of the community, its needs, and assets,
- * to explore what resources each of you might bring to a project,
- * to raise a concern,
- * to educate the official about a particular area of interest that you have in common,
- * to ensure the official's understanding of a policy issue, or
- * to gain a specific commitment?

Match the Image to the Message

How might we best convey our message? If we are attempting to demonstrate the difference we are making, would a site visit be more effective than simply chatting in an office? Seeing individuals touched by the foundation and hearing their stories first hand can prove very powerful. Can such a site visit be conducted in a way that is not forced, does not put pressure on the nonprofit, and respects the individuals involved? Be considerate of the grantee's schedule and do not impose the visit.

If we are anxious to communicate our deep knowledge of a neighborhood, its challenges, and what the foundation has done to transform the area, perhaps a driving or walking tour is appropriate. Politicians recognize the importance of relationships and may be pleasantly surprised by the extent to which foundations partner with grassroots organizations. Visiting a representative in an area where the foundation has made a significant investment also provides the opportunity to discuss ways philanthropic dollars can complement public funds for the benefit of the community. Be sure to point out what was made possible with state or federal dollars. Often such site visits may offer the official a chance to document his or her work in the area. Be prepared to take photos.

If the purpose of the meeting is to discuss policy issues, the fewer distractions, the better. While the policy expert on the official's staff may still be in Washington, the representative may have more time to visit and learn during district days. In the interest of time, it is often best to meet the representative in his or her offices, where staff might sit in on the discussion.

Time is Tight

Once we establish an agenda, we must be realistic in estimating how long the visit will take and ask for that amount of time. If the representative cannot attend the entire meeting, it is often possible to continue the conversation with his/her staff member. What ever the case, we must make the most of the visit, be efficient, and focus on what we hope to accomplish.