

CONGRESSIONAL CONTACT TIPS FOR NCPG MEMBERS

As the national advocate for programs and services to help problem gamblers and their families, one of our most important challenges is to raise awareness of problem gambling issues in Congress. While WE all know how important our cause is, the fact that Congress doesn't is reflected in the fact that there are no specific allocations for problem gambling issues in the entire \$2.57 trillion dollar Federal budget for FY 2006.

We have developed these tips to help you contact and educate your Senators and Representatives and their staff. With all the issues Congress faces, it is impossible (and illogical) to think the legislator will know each one. BUT THAT'S WHY THEY HAVE A STAFF, and each staff member has a specific area of expertise. When votes are taken, the legislator asks that staff member how that issue fits with his/her past positions. A quality meeting with staff thus is a great use of time and can really influence future votes.

To find your Congressional representatives: go to www.house.gov and www.senate.gov for a quick and easy finder on the front page. The sites also have web pages and contact information for individual members.

To find your state legislative representatives: most states have excellent legislative sites where you can type in your zip code to quickly find your representatives.

DC Legislative Visits

- Never mail a letter requesting a meeting – it takes two-three months to get delivered with the screening imposed after the anthrax scare.
- Send a fax detailing your purpose for visiting before you call back to actually schedule a meeting, but it is pointless to send the fax more than three weeks before your visit. It will just get filed or lost.
- Call the office to verify the scheduling procedure, particularly noting the name, phone and fax of the appointment or scheduling secretary.
- Also use the fax (and you can call) to make a request or advise senators or representatives about a particular issue or action. (Please note use of e-mail is discouraged for this purpose unless specific permission is granted by the staff member. The reasons are that staff consider this a personal space, but with more frequent use of e-mail, this may change; and faxes and calls are tallied to weigh constituent support on issues. E-mails usually don't get counted, but this may be changing.)
- If faxing to request action or provide advice, use a formal letter structure, remembering to precede the legislator's name in the internal address as "The Honorable . . ." The salutation should read "Dear Representative ___ or Dear Senator ___." (Always use the legislator's name; it will be routed to the appropriate staff. If you have a personal relationship with a particular staff member, place a note to him or her on the fax cover sheet.) The formal wording adds weight to your message. Formality counts on The Hill, and it shows you know what you're doing.
- Calls also count when immediate action is needed. Receptionists will take your detailed message, and all calls are tallied by issue. Sometimes, the most calls wins.

- If you are planning a visit, call 7-10 days before your intended visit. Most of the offices do not schedule appointments until the week before the meeting. The schedules and times are too fluid.
- Don't be disappointed if your meeting only is with staff (as noted above).
- Plan to arrive 15-30 minutes prior to the appointment time. Although you probably will be kept waiting awhile, don't EVER keep the legislator or staff waiting – and the early arrival will allow time to clear the super-sensitive x-ray screening equipment.
- Plan to make your key points within 15 minutes and be ready to move on. If you get more time, or are asked questions that take longer, that's just a bonus. Most often it's enter, sit, spit what you have to say, and get.
- Prepare a "leave-behind" such as a folder with key points, papers or brochures on your issues. Make sure you offer yourself or your organization as a resource.
- ALWAYS follow up with a thank-you note (sent by fax or possibly an e-mail attachment) within a week.

Requests for Action

- Fax a letter to their district office AND their DC office. Letters from constituents will get priority over letters from state residents, which will get priority over letters from non-residents.
- Letters should be no more than one page and have a very clear request for a specific action.
- Try to localize the issue by including statistics and stories that are from the state, and if possible, the district. To find your state's population go to www.census.gov.
- Try to match your Board members or volunteers with their local representatives so you have a personal contact in every district in the state.
- Follow up within two weeks by inquiring whether the fax was received and offering to answer any questions or clarify any issues.