



How to Meet with your Delegate or State Senator

Meeting with your state legislator is your right to voice your issues. Your legislators are elected officials who work for you!

You can arrange a meeting to tell your legislators what you think about ensuring quality, affordable, accessible healthcare coverage for all Virginians and getting him or her to take action on closing the coverage gap.

Given how short the timeframe that General Assembly meets (mid-January to the end of February in odd years and mid-January to mid-March in even years), your elected leaders are usually in their districts. If you are part of a congregational group or a community organization, you can almost always schedule a meeting directly with the elected leader. It is usually better to meet directly with the elected leader rather than with a staff person.

Prior to the meeting

Call VICPP/VCV. Talk with one of the VICPP/VCV team members to discuss talking points on Expanding Healthcare Coverage, and what actions the legislator can take on the issue. If you need it, the team can provide you with:

- The legislator's and aide's contact information, including office location and telephone number.
- Information on the legislator's position, voting record (healthcare coverage), and statistics about health coverage in the district.
- Personal stories of people that may be impacted by closing the gap within the legislator's district.
- Background literature on the issues.

Recruit participants. Invite people to join in the meeting who believe health care coverage should be expanded and who live in the legislator's district. Try to recruit community leaders, health care providers, clergy, lay activists and people who fall in Virginia's health care coverage gap and need the General Assembly to address this health care crisis. If you can find people who have been supporters of the elected leaders and who support expanding health care coverage, invite them too. VICPP/VCV will have some names of people in your district whom you can contact as well.

Schedule the meeting. Submit a written request or make a call to the legislator or aide. VICPP/VCV can provide you with the contact information, if needed. Sometimes the legislators control their own schedules. Most times, however, their aides manage their schedules. Make friends with the aide. He or she can be beneficial in setting the meeting date and ensuring the logistics.

Find a few possible dates that will work for most of your likely participants and then propose a few dates and times to the legislator. Ask for an hour of time. You may not need or get that much time, but you should ask for it so you can have a substantial conversation. It is hard to get that much time during the General Assembly, but it is possible in the district. As soon as the date and time are confirmed, get it out to the likely participants so they can get it on the calendar.

Prepare for the meeting. Think ahead of time about what you want to say and who will say it. Although you want to present some “facts”, the meeting should not focus on facts, but rather how important closing the coverage gap is to constituents and to Virginia. The issue will be won based more on politics than on facts. You must try to convince the legislator that he or she has strong support in the district for expanding the coverage gap. Here is a basic outline for how a meeting might go:

- *Thank you.* Thank the legislator for the meeting. Acknowledge any past votes or statements in support of expanding coverage.
- *Opening prayer.* Have one of the clergy offer an opening prayer. (Make sure the prayer is done in an inclusive manner so all faiths present feel included.)
- *Introductions.* Ask each person in your group to introduce him/herself and explain a bit about his/her connections in the community. “My name is Camila Brown. I chair the social action committee at First Presbyterian Church and I am active in my neighborhood association.” Essentially you are trying to demonstrate your group is well connected in the community and that the legislator should listen to you. This is not the moment to be overly modest.
- *Personal stories.* Recruit at least one and possibly more people to talk who fall in the coverage gap. These personal stories matter to legislators. This is not a facts problem. It is a human problem. It is much harder for a legislator to refuse to work on an issue when constituents affected by the problem are in front of him or her.
- *Why important.* Line up a couple of people to talk about why the issue is important. This is where you present a few facts about the number of people in the district who fall in the coverage gap, how important the money would be to local hospitals and how this could help local employers.
- *Political support.* Ask someone to suggest how you could support the legislator in stepping forth in to close the coverage gap.
- *Ask.* Think ahead of time about what your “ask” might be. Will you support closing the coverage gap? Will you remove the budget language prohibiting closing the coverage gap? Talk with the VICPP/VCV staff about what the best “ask” might be.
- *Listen and respond.* Legislators will talk. Listen to your elected leaders position and respond as best you can. If concerns are raised that you aren’t sure how to address, offer to get back to the person.
- *Give materials.* Give copies of literature/pamphlets on the issue. Bring enough copies for the legislator, aide, and supporters.

- *Summarize.* Summarize what happened in the meeting (as best you can). “My understanding is that you are not concerned about the large number of people in the district who are without health care, but that you are concerned about taking federal dollars for health care. We will follow-up with information about other states that have taken federal dollars and what the economic impact has been.”
- *Thank the legislator.* Always thank the legislator for his/her time.
- *Take a photo.* Ask for a photo of your group with the legislator.

Decide upon a facilitator. This person should facilitate the conversation allowing for those you have arranged to speak to do so. Sometimes legislators are adept at dominating conversations. You want to make sure that you can cover your main points.

Decide who else will speak. Be clear on who will play which roles in the meeting.

Schedule a time to meet. Ideally, your group should meet in person ahead of time to review who will say what and to practice. Groups often do this an hour or two before the meeting, but it can be helpful to further in advance. You can do the planning meeting by conference call, but it is easier to get to know one another if the meeting is done in person. See if there is a congregation nearby where you can meet.

Reminders

Have a designated meeting place and time for the group of supporters to meet up.

Be on time.

Keep track of the time allotted. Stay focus on the rehearsed talking points.

Always be polite and respectful. Do not become oppositional and argumentative Remain calm and conversational. Allow the legislature to respond to points made.

Clearly state the actions you would like them to take. Listen to and document legislature’s response and comments.

Send thank you notes to both the elected leader and his/her and aide.

After the meeting

Debrief. Most groups debrief immediately after their visits. Find a coffee shop or place nearby where you can chat. What worked well? What would you do different next time? What immediate follow-up is needed? What will be needed more long-term to convince him or her to help in closing the coverage gap? What should be your group’s next steps?

Thank you. Send a thank you note within 72 hours. Reiterate your concern about closing the coverage gap. Promise to follow-up on any concerns raised.

Report to VICPP/VCV. Someone should report to the VCPP/VCV staff what happened. You can send a written report, email or simply call. Be sure to share your thoughts on next steps.

Frame the photo. If you took a picture, enlarge it to a 5 x7 or 8x10, frame it, and send a copy to the legislator. It will remind the elected leader of your group.

Send follow up materials. If you promised to get information about the economic benefits to your community, send that information. VICPP/VCV staff can help you track down information your legislator might need.

Monitor actions. Do your best to monitor how your legislator is voting and public statements on closing the coverage gap. If the legislator says anything positive, in the media or a public setting, send an immediate note commending him or her. All legislators like to be praised and need to be encouraged when they are inching into new positions that they feel are politically risky.

Maintain the relationship. No matter what happens, seek to maintain a relationship with you're your elected leader and his or her aide.

Continue communicating. If the legislator follows through on the request or action taken that was discussed at the meeting, write another thank you note. If he or she does not follow through or opposed what was discussed, send a note to voice your concern or disappointment.

Continue organizing. If the legislator is not yet persuaded to close the health care coverage gap, you must organize more people to demonstrate the political support in his or her district. Have you gotten 100 personal letters to the legislator? Could you get five congregations to invite the legislator to speak to their social concerns groups about what her or she will be doing to help uninsured people in the district? How many people can you get to the legislator's town hall meeting to ask questions about the issue? Can you get other groups of people to meet with him or her on the subject? Don't give up. Organize!