

## Public Health and Health Reform - Top Ten Tips for Attending Town Hall Meetings

Through Labor Day, Members of Congress will be at home in your communities holding town hall meetings and seeking input from constituents specifically on health care reform. While some of these discussions have recently been heated and emotional, they provide an excellent opportunity for representatives of local health departments to be seen as the trusted, knowledgeable, reliable, and reasonable public health professionals you are. The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) encourages local health department leaders and staff to attend these gatherings as they provide a great local opportunity for public health officials to have their voices heard by their policymakers at home in their own communities.

Members of Congress host town hall meetings in a variety of locations in the communities they represent, including hospitals, clinics, schools, and health departments. Representatives and Senators take seriously the questions they receive and the issues that are raised by attendees who make the effort to attend a town hall meeting. Often there are reporters present, which can provide another opportunity to bring attention to issues impacting local health departments (LHDs).

NACCHO provides the following recommendations/tips:

1. **Sign-up for the alert list for your Members' newsletters, press releases, and other notices.** Members of Congress announce their public meetings and local "appearances" schedule through email notices, newsletters, press releases, or media announcements. On most policymakers' website, there is a portal through which you can sign-up for their notices and newsletters (access your particular Members' websites through <http://capwiz.com/naccho/home/>). *Unless you have authorization to use your work contact information, be sure to provide your home or personal information.*
2. **Learn about the issues.** NACCHO government affairs staff will provide you with relevant background on prevention and public health in health reform. You can download relevant, summaries and other documents for reference from the NACCHO website.
3. **Prepare your message ahead of time to ensure that you maximize the benefit of your attendance at the meeting.** For too long health care has focused on treating people after they've become sick, instead of keeping them well in the first place. **Now is your chance to: defend the inclusion of public health funding and programs in health care reform by helping dispel myths associated with these provisions; educate your elected officials about how this funding will protect and promote health and well-being in your community; and give examples of the role that your local health department plays in keeping their constituents safe and healthy.**

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4. **Do your homework on the Member of Congress.** Make sure you know a little about the policymaker before you attend the meeting. You should review his/her vote record, read his/her bio, and spend a little time on his/her website, so you are familiar with his/her positions, priorities, and orientation to issues regarding public health, health reform, and federal funding for health programs. *Be sure to let NACCHO government affairs staff know that you are planning to attend a meeting, and they can assist you with preparing and provide you background information about the Member and NACCHO's relationship with him/her.*
5. **Find out about the meeting format, agenda, and/or topic area prior to arriving.** If the specific meeting details are not included in the initial meeting notice, visit the Senator's/Representative's website and/or call his/her office to try to learn more. Try to arrive early, so you have time to seek out staff, become familiar with the meeting format, and/or identify if there is a place for constituents to sign-in and indicate if they have a comment to make or a question to ask.
6. **Prepare your question/comment in advance and bring NACCHO advocacy materials to give to Senator/Representative and his/her staff.** Town hall meetings often are fast-paced and can be crowded, so you may only have a minute or two to make your point. Prior to arriving at the meeting, write down the specific question you wish to ask or jot down a few notes at the meeting; it is best to focus your comments on one particular item and to "cut to the chase." In case time runs out and you do not have a chance to speak, or you are cut off, try to speak to the Senator/Representative and staff on their way out and given them your materials, so they are clear on the "ask." NACCHO staff will provide you with materials that you may give to the Senator/Representative and/or staff in addition to any background materials you have about your LHD and its activities in the community. In the "leave-behind" packet, you should also include information regarding how to reach you and NACCHO government affairs staff.
7. **When called on, be clear, concise, polite and professional. Be sure to express appreciation, identify yourself, and – if you are authorized – your role in your health department.** It is best to weave together your "introduction" with your question/comment. For example:  
  
*"Good afternoon. Thank you for holding this important forum. I appreciate the opportunity to speak. My name is Susie Smith; I live in Sunnyvale and work at the Santa Clara County Health Department. I am here today as a public health professional concerned about the health of people in this community. I want to make sure that public health is not lost in the health reform debate. Both health reform bills in the House and the Senate support prevention and public health, which help to keep people from becoming sick in the first place. Do you support dedicated funding for prevention and public health activities conducted by local health departments in health reform?"*
8. **Be sure to directly ask for a response to your question, but do not badger the Senator/Representative for an answer.** Sometimes elected officials feel put on the spot or are not able to give you a specific answer at the time of the public meeting. Sometimes they are being evasive, in other cases, it is legitimately because he/she needs to do some research first, or check in with staff. If s/he cannot give you a response, be polite and express your appreciation for the opportunity to ask the

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question/voice the concern and let him/her know you will follow up and that you look forward to receiving a response/answer. NACCHO staff can work with you to follow-up and secure an answer from the Senator/Representative.

9. **Pay attention to dynamics and the macropolitical environment.** Particularly on the topic of health reform, some meetings recently have become dominated with protesters and audience attendees getting upset about a particular issue. If this occurs, or, if you see that the Senator/Representative appears frustrated, tired, distracted, or disengaged, it might be best to remain silent and not speak, as it might be counter-productive. Instead, you can either try to catch the staff on the way out and/or follow-up with a letter to the Member, referencing that you were at the meeting, thanking him/her for holding the event, and asking the question or making the comment that you had prepared for the forum. *NACCHO government affairs staff can work with you to craft a letter and assist with the follow-up.*
10. **Be sure to inform NACCHO government affairs staff that you attended a town hall meeting and provide a summary of what occurred, including information regarding how you were received (if you did ask a question, make a comment, or get to speak directly to the elected official or staff).** By “reporting back,” NACCHO staff can take certain actions to help reinforce the message you delivered, connect with staff in the Senator’s/Representative’s Washington, DC office and inform them of your participation, and assist you with following-up, so that your efforts are maximized.
11. **Following-up is as important as showing up.** Within a week of attending a town hall meeting, send (by email, fax, or USPS, whichever is the office/staffer’s preferred mode of communication) a follow-up letter to the Senator/Representative and/or the staff person. Be sure to identify yourself and remind them that you were at the town hall meeting (include the meeting date and location, since they often hold multiple such forums in a single day or week). This correspondence allows you to restate your question/concern and formally request a response. Also, if the policymaker or staff requested information from you (e.g., particular statistics for your community, a copy of a report), be sure to provide this information, as well. If you are not able to provide them with the information at the time of your follow-up letter, indicate that you are working on obtaining the items and give a sense of the timeframe in which you should have the items to them. *Remember: with all of this, NACCHO government affairs staff is here to help!*

**\*\* If your Member of Congress is not conducting any public events during the recess week, or you are not able to attend, consider setting up a private meeting with them or dropping some materials by their local office. Then follow up with staff and/or the Member of Congress as outlined above.**

*“Eighty percent of success is showing up.” Town hall meetings offer a great opportunity to deliver your message and secure support for local health departments. Good luck and have fun!*