

Meeting Elected Officials and Candidates in Public Settings



Elected officials and those campaigning to be such are usually quite visible in the communities they represent or wish to represent. This is especially true during the run-up to November elections. But at other times, too, Senators and Representatives may hold town meetings or other public events in or near your community.

Members of Congress also have extended periods of time – recesses – during which Congress is not in session and Members are expected to be working in their congressional district or state. This is particularly true around holidays and for the month of August. Such times are perfect for trying to meet with them in their local office. If you've developed relationships with the scheduler and the staff in Washington, DC (which hopefully you will do during WAPC's first national advocacy day in 2009), you might try to work through them to gain an appointment while the Member is back home. This is also a good time to start working on your relationships with key staff who work in the local office.

Public forums, whether a town meeting or campaign appearance, are excellent places and times for you to bring attention to prostate cancer issues. Remember that legislators want to appear to be responsive to constituent concerns – and having them respond to you in a public setting has the added benefit of their being “on the record.”

First, find out if there is a schedule of such events in your area. Check the website of the legislator/candidate or call the local office. Once you've decided on an appropriate event, **prepare yourself** carefully. Know exactly what you are going to say and ask, if called upon. It is essential that you can make your entire statement briefly – in just three sentences! **Practice** in advance.

Arrive at the venue **very early** and get a seat in the front row or another prominent location so that you can be recognized to ask a question. If there are standing microphones set up in the hall, sit next to one so that you can be first to it when the floor is opened for questions. Before the event, try to talk to staff to let them know you would like to ask a question about cancer and what the government needs to be doing. Remember that they will be assessing your credibility when they meet you because they do not want surprises during the event or to see their boss embarrassed in any way. Make it clear that you will not give a speech and are not there to “show up” the Member or candidate, but that it is an issue you would like to hear him or her address. Also, exchange business cards with any staff who might be available before and after the event. If possible, try to have an informal conversation with the legislator, too, after the event.

When called upon, **do not** make a long speech. If you do, you will lose the interest (and sympathy) of the audience, as well as your credibility with the staff and elected official. Instead, make a personal and rational three-sentence statement about the issue. Then ask your question succinctly. Be in touch with WAPC staff in advance to discuss what you are going to say and to help hone your timely, important question.