

July 2025 Edition

GRASSROOTS HANDBOOK

Your Guide to
Effective Advocacy

Provided by America's Blood Centers



**America's
Blood
Centers**
Powered by Community.

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ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

PURPOSE. To raise awareness throughout the U.S. Government of the essential role played by independent community-based blood centers in ensuring a safe and available blood supply necessary for the health care system. You and your blood center play an important role as an effective voice for your blood center and the industry.

YOUR IMPORTANCE. Your Congressional Representatives and Senators need to understand the number of lives you impact, especially within their district. Most people, including those in government, do not understand how the blood supply works. Educating them about what you and your center do for their community will raise their awareness of the important roll you play saving and improving lives of their constituents.

Once they understand what community-based blood centers do for their community, they will want to help in your important mission. And remember, as a Member of Congress, they serve everyone within the district and will want to demonstrate support for those doing such important mission driven work for their community.



YOUR INVOLVEMENT. Developing relationships with your Members of Congress is easy and takes little time. A strong relationship requires only occasional visits with them and/or their staffs, either to their offices or inviting them to your centers, and occasional email contact when there is an issue you want support for or believe they should be aware of.

LOCAL IMPACT. Educating your congressional representatives in advance on issues of importance, especially if you should experience adverse publicity or need a community leader to raise an issue in the future, will usually guarantee you a sympathetic ear and perhaps a helpful friend in your hour of need.

NATIONAL IMPACT. A relationship with your Members of Congress helps reinforce the message ABC delivers on federal legislative issues. It also emphasizes the fact that constituents/voters are affected by the decisions they make in Congress.

CONTENTS. This handbook provides you with the tools necessary to reach out to your Members of Congress. It outlines how to foster effective relations and the messages you can deliver as an advocate for your blood center as well as for independent community blood centers across the nation.

ABOUT ABC

FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY. The ABC Public Policy Council annually updates the ABC Advocacy Agenda. The Advocacy Agenda outlines ABC's proactive advocacy asks that have a clear federal government solution. The agenda addresses issues with legislative solutions as well as those for regulatory agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). ABC then develops advocacy materials in support of these advocacy asks with the support of ABC committees and members. These advocacy materials are used as ABC staff and members take these asks to Congress and the agencies.

In addition to our proactive advocacy agenda, ABC is continually monitoring developments in Congress and the agencies to respond to any emerging issues with a potential impact on blood centers. ABC meets with Members of Congress and their staffs in Washington to educate them on the blood supply and blood center issues and to advocate the positions of ABC members. When appropriate, ABC develops position statements and other materials on important issues. Legislation in Congress can affect virtually every aspect of blood center operations.

COALITIONS. To expand our reach and work with allies on issues whenever possible, ABC participates in coalitions for the advocacy of specific federal legislative issues. Some of these coalitions are long term and others are short term as issues arise. ABC is always seeking partnerships and coalitions to ensure broad support from as many outside partners as we can to show broad support for blood centers and the need for a safe and available blood supply.



DOWNLOAD THE ADVOCACY AGENDA



Learn more about our work promoting the value of blood to patients, communities, and the health care system.

THE MEETING

WHOM TO MEET. You can find information about the legislators that represent your district and the districts you serve at <https://www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member>.

If you have any questions on which offices to reach out to or for information on how to reach your federal representatives and their staff, please call ABC at (202) 393-5725.

WHEN TO MEET. Generally, your Members of Congress will be more readily able to see you and to spend time with you without distractions when you visit them in their home districts. Federal lawmakers usually return to their districts on the weekends. They also have “district work periods” scheduled throughout the year, notable during most of the month of August. For the best times to schedule an appointment, please refer to the calendar for the Senate and House of Representatives.

While it is always nice to meet with Members of Congress, it is essential to educate and build a relationship with their legislative staff that handles health care issues. These staffers are responsible for educating their boss and often have a great deal of sway in the issues their boss engages on (as well as doing much of the day to day work of actually making things happen). Meeting with the legislative staff that handles health care issues are often located in Washington, DC; however, these staff often travel to the district at least once a year and are willing to schedule local meetings or meet virtually.

ABC’s annual Day on Capitol Hill (virtual) is a great way to start building that relationship.

SETTING UP THE MEETING. To meet with a Member of Congress in their district office, call or email the Scheduler (follow up a written request with a phone call).

Many Congressional websites identify this person and include a way to contact them, otherwise you can call the office and ask for the scheduler’s email (note: most have a district scheduler and a separate DC scheduler).

If you cannot identify this person, reach out to ABC and we can help. Explain who you are and who you represent. Explain the purpose of the meeting – either a “courtesy call” or to discuss a specific issue. It is best to assure the Scheduler that the meeting will be brief (15-20 minutes), however, a visit to your facility can be scheduled for longer.

In scheduling the meeting, try to be accommodating about whatever scheduling arrangements are suggested by the Member’s office.

Scheduling meetings with congressional staffers is a much less formal process and should generally be done via an email requesting a meeting. Most offices are willing to engage in phone or other virtual meetings, though in person meetings are always great for relationship building.

THE MEETING

Email the staffer with your availability, but also recognize these staffers are very busy (note: if you are asking for a meeting in the district, remember that they have limited time in the district) so be flexible with meeting times. It's always important to note that talking to the legislative staffer is often a great way to move forward a request to meet with the Member in the district, while they don't control the schedule, they can often flag a meeting or visit to your facility as a priority.

THE "COURTESY CALL" & "THE ISSUE MEETING." There are two types of meetings. The Courtesy Call is a brief 15-20 minute visit, intended to either introduce yourself to a Member you have not met before, or touch base with a Member with whom you have not had contact recently.

This is an educational meeting to let them know your center serves their constituents and to explain how you are a part of health care and let them know your footprint in their district (both collections and hospitals). (A sample "Courtesy Call" agenda follows in the next section.)

The second type of call is the Issue Meeting, to express your concerns about a specific topic. The ABC office can provide information and talking points on specific legislative issues to prepare you for your Issue Meeting.

PREPARING FOR MEETINGS. Whenever possible make sure you have as many constituents as possible. This might include blood center staff, Board members, donors, or even blood drive sponsors. It always helps when a Member of Congress hears the same message, either individually or collectively, from constituents and/or community leaders at home.

If you meet with the Member of Congress or their staff as an informal group, it is critical that you plan your discussion strategy in advance of the meeting. Consider preparing an agenda in advance and providing copies to those participating in the meeting, but also don't feel like you can't go "off script" if the Member has questions. The very best meetings are often the ones that become a conversation.

Clearly designate the lead person who will deliver the key message you want to leave with the Member of Congress or their staff. This way you make sure you get your core message out no matter what.

Be on time for the appointment.



THE MEETING

MAKING YOUR POINTS CLEARLY. Start by telling the Member of Congress what your blood center does, most people just know that blood is always there, give them a little more details. It's fascinating, plus it shows just how important what you do is.

It's always important to share the challenges you face, especially ways they can help. Be clear in your concerns and provide specifics whenever possible.

Be clear with any asks for help and whenever possible get them to self-identify as a champion for the blood supply.

Pay attention to the staff member taking notes and responsible for follow-up after the meeting. It is often helpful to reach out to them individually as they often are the ones responsible for actually doing the work and getting their members to engage.

Provide the Member and staff with written materials (hand-outs and information on the specific issue, on your blood center and the role you play in the blood supply in your area).



And always send electronic copies. Be sure to provide information and statistics that are particular to your state and/or region so that the relevance to the Member is apparent.

Make sure you are aware of any opposition to your position on the issue. Explain and respond to the opposition's position, but of course also emphasize who supports your position and why.

It's ok not to have all the answers. If a question is asked you aren't sure about, simply let them know you will follow up. Then make sure you ultimately do follow up with the information.

Be a good source of information and make sure they are aware you are available if they have additional questions or when other related issues arise. You will gain credibility if you can both educate and persuade.

FOLLOWING UP. Every participant should write an individual thank-you letter to the Member of Congress or their staff immediately after the meeting. These thank you notes are a great relationship building tool.

THE MEETING

They don't need to be formal. Briefly outline the most important points covered during the meeting and include any additional information requested. Be sure to express appreciation to any of the Member's staff who were involved in scheduling, facilitating, or attending the meeting.

Get to know the right people on the member's staff (e.g., Health Legislative Aide, Legislative Director, Administrative Assistant, District Office Director). The quickest way to a Member of Congress' heart and mind is through the staff. Include a personal note to your key staff contact when you send a letter to the Member thanking them for their efforts to help you and offering to supply additional information or help whenever necessary.

Maintain contacts throughout the legislative process. If Members of Congress vote with you, thank them for their support. If they vote against you, thank them for considering your ideas, then look for new angles and new developments to share with your representatives to update them, change their minds, etc.

Let ABC know who you are meeting with. Better yet, include a photo we can share on social media (make sure to get the ok from the Member or their staff).

OTHER THINGS TO REMEMBER. Be patient and flexible. Due to their crowded schedules, Members of Congress are sometimes late, and are often interrupted during meetings.

Don't be political. Clearly define how your blood center is important to the welfare of the Member's constituents, and how you can be of assistance to him/her but avoid getting political. Remember, regardless of their politics they represent you and the people they serve.



THE COURTESY CALL

SAMPLE AGENDA



The “Courtesy Call” is simple and takes only a few minutes. Below is a sample meeting agenda and a list of suggested materials to use during your visit.

I. Introductions

II. Local Importance – Blood Center information to demonstrate that you are an essential part of health care for their constituents by providing the necessary safe and available blood supply.

A. Structure: not-for-profit and independent, with a community-based board. Don't bad mouth other industries but it is often helpful to explain who you are not (Red Cross or paid plasma).

B. Licensed and regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

C. A bit of information about how the blood supply works – most people know the blood is there when it's needed but don't understand all that it takes to get it there.

D. What services are provided to the community by the blood center.

E. Any investments you have made in the community, including the number of jobs your blood center creates.

F. What hospitals are served by the blood center

G. A little information about your donors and recipients to really humanize what you do and why it is so important.

III. Close - Thank the Member of Congress or their staff for the meeting and invite him/her to visit the blood center.



THE COURTESY CALL

An important note about inviting your Member of Congress and their staff to the blood center:

Make sure to provide options. Not all members of Congress or their staff are comfortable around blood and needles, and some may have a reason they cannot donate that they don't want to share.

Make sure they know there are options that will fit their comfort level. If they are uncomfortable around blood or needles, invite them to greet donors at the door and thank them in the canteen, let them talk to and thank front line employees.

If they don't personally want to donate, invite them to visit your lab to see blood processed and tested or to greet donors in your donor room. If they don't want pictures taken of them donating or don't want it to be part of the story, give them that option.

There are a lot of ways your Member of Congress and staff can get a lot out of a visit even if they don't want to donate blood or see a needle.

MATERIALS FOR THE COURTESY CALL.

Make sure to have the following blood center information on hand that can easily be sent prior to, during, or after the call:

- Services provided by the blood center;
- Hospitals or number of constituents served;
- Average number of volunteers who donate;
- Special programs coordinated by the blood center.

ABC has an array of materials on specific topics and the blood supply. Visit our website or contact us and we can help put together what makes sense for your visit.

DOWNLOAD RESOURCES ONLINE



The advocacy section of ABC's website has a series of one-pagers, FAQ documents, background information, and more that are available for use by your member center.

WRITING A MEMBER

These days it is rare to send a hard copy letter to a member of Congress or their staff, and not advised given congressional security protocols. Instead, utilize email to send any information or official correspondence. A few key tips to keep in mind when addressing your congressional offices:

State your purpose for writing in the first paragraph. Be courteous, include key information, and use examples to support your position. Keep the letter to one page.

ADDRESS HEADER TO A SENATOR. The Honorable (full name), United States Senate, Washington, DC 20510.

ADDRESSING THE LETTER. Dear Senator (last name)

ADDRESS HEADER TO A REPRESENTATIVE. The Honorable (full name), United States House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515.

ADDRESSING THE LETTER. Dear Representative (last name)

NOTE: When writing to the Chair of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, it is proper to address them as: Dear Mr. Chairman or Madam Chairwoman; or Dear Mr. Speaker.

SENDING AN EMAIL. The Hill is a surprisingly casual place when it comes to communications and being too formal will show you as an outsider and demonstrate you don't have a relationship with the office. Here are a few key tips:

For Hill staffers, always use first names and a tone you would use with a business acquaintance.

Skip the formalities and keep the email to the point. This can be something as simple as "Hi John, FDA recently released a new draft guidance and I wanted to make sure you are aware of it. Our blood center is still working through all the details, but we are generally pleased to see FDA is making evidence-based changes that will improve the safety and availability of the blood supply. Let me know if you have any questions. Best, Bob".

Make sure to include your email signature so they have all your information.

When you want to link to a document make sure to paste the whole link, because of security on the IT system most links are stripped out of emails, and you want to make it as easy as possible for them to get to your information.

AUGUST RECESS

During the month of August, Congress is generally not scheduled to meet in DC, thus allowing members the availability to meet with their constituents and attend local events in their district or state.

The purpose of the August Recess is for members of Congress to have the opportunity to engage with constituents locally. During this time, many DC policy staffers also have the opportunity to visit locally in the district.

The August Recess often provides the best time to schedule a member of Congress to tour your blood center.

IMPORTANCE OF A SITE VISIT: *Continuing to Build that Relationship:* A tour of your blood center is an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your member of Congress and their staff.

Advocate for the Blood Supply: A tour is also an opportunity for you to advocate for the US blood supply. Based on your member of Congress and the challenges your blood center faces, it is best to select one or two advocacy asks to share with the member while they see the critical work you do.

Seeing With Their Own Eyes: A tour is an opportunity for you to show the work of your blood center and talk about the blood supply

Seeing the work of your blood center first hand is much more likely to leave an impression than simply telling them about it.

Meeting the Local Office: A site visit is a great way to grow the connection with the local congressional office. The local office can address local challenges and pass any concerns on to the DC office.

Meeting the Staff: While the focus is often on the member of Congress, it is also important to invite the congressional staffer that handles healthcare. Additionally, the district staffers know the state or district well and can be a wonderful connection to other people within the community. The congressional staffers are the workhorses that directly handle the policy space.

Photo Opportunity: A site visit provides an amazing photo opportunity for both the congressional office and the blood center. While most congressional offices are fine with photography, it is always best to ask before photos are taken.

Social Media: The photos from the visit can then be shared on social media and other resources. Again, just make sure to ask whether they want their account linked to the image or if they want specific hash tags used.

AUGUST RECESS

CONNECTING WITH CONGRESSIONAL

OFFICES: *Reaching Out:* ABC can connect blood centers with the ideal contacts in the congressional office to coordinate an event. ABC is also happy to play a supporting role if members wish to reach out to the congressional offices themselves.

Key Staffers: The key staffers for a site visit are a combination of the district coordinator and the scheduler.

- The scheduler handles the member of Congress' schedule and the district/regional coordinator handles logistics when the member is in the district or state.
- The health policy staffer from the DC office should be notified about the meeting and invited to join as well.

Everyone on the Same Page: The level of communication between the DC and regional offices varies from office to office. Due to this variance, it is important to coordinate with both the DC office and the regional office.

ABC Support: ABC may be able to send a team member from our government affairs team for support during a site visit, if desired. We are also happy to work with ABC members to provide a list of possible congressional offices to reach out to. Finally, we can also provide materials and talking points.

Briefing the Health Staffer: Even before a site visit is booked, it is important to include the health staffer in the process and share any materials regarding what will be discussed during the site visit. This will allow the health staffer to brief the member ahead of time, and lead to a more productive conversation during the limited time of a site visit.

CONDUCTING A VISIT: *Important To Be*

Flexible: Each office has different availability and may handle logistics slightly differently. For Senate offices or large House districts, members will have multiple regional offices, so if there are multiple locations, it is best to coordinate a site location that is convenient for the member.

What to Discuss: The discussion should be a blend of explaining the workings of a blood center and the policy asks from ABC's [Advocacy Agenda](#).

AUGUST RECESS

Examples:

- If the member of Congress you are meeting with is on a key committee, it is best to discuss policy that is handled by that committee.
- If the member of Congress has a medical background, the conversation could be more medical in nature.
- If there is an interest in community engagement, the message could be geared towards needing more donors.
- If the member has very little understanding of a blood center, keep the conversation as a “101” and focus on the work you do in the community for their constituents.
- Consider including the employees of a blood center as they are also constituents.

What You Do for the Community: During a site visit, it is important to emphasize the vital work that is done to support the community (their constituents).

You can mention the local hospitals that you supply as well as EMS services, if applicable.

Other community partnerships are also great to mention during the visit and if you can it may be helpful to include a partner related to your ask in the meeting, for example inviting your local EMS agency you supply with blood if talking about prehospital blood.

Involving Constituent Donors: Blood centers can also involve donor constituents either while they are donating or during another part of the visit. It is important that individuals remember to be professional. If blood centers do not want to take the risk of a constituent not appearing professional, a constituent need not be involved.

Congressional Gift Giving Rule: A detail to keep in mind is around congressional gift giving rules. Generally, except in narrow circumstances, members of Congress cannot accept any gifts or items of value. Small items like pens with the blood center’s logo are generally acceptable. If there is a specific item that you would like to share with the office, please reach out to Lorenzo Rodriguez at lrodriguez@americasblood.org to check if the items meet the requirements for an exception. It’s always better to know before hand the item is okay to give.



AUGUST RECESS

OTHER WAYS TO PARTICIPATE:

- **Local Blood Dives:** Another activity that blood centers can invite members of Congress to are local blood drives happening in the district or state.
- A blood drive would work a little differently from a site visit as the location is different and there is the possibility of the member or staffer donating.
- When inviting a member of Congress to a blood drive, it is important to inform them that they do not need to donate, as some of them would like to meet constituents but perhaps not donate.

In-State Meeting: If the member of Congress cannot travel, then a meeting in the regional office could be suggested. This would function similarly to a meeting in DC where you engage with staff and possibly with the member.

Town Hall Events: While not as common as they used to be, some members of Congress still have town hall meetings. This is another opportunity to directly ask questions to the members of Congress. You can find out if your member of Congress is having an in person or virtual town hall on their website.

FOLLOW UP:

- *Thank You:* It is important that you follow up with the congressional office to thank them for their time and see whether there are other activities you can partner on. This can range from working on policy issues, such as those in the ABC [Advocacy Agenda](#), to general support for the US blood supply.
- *Staying In the Loop:* Even if the health staffer from DC cannot join, it is good to include them in the follow-up so they remain in the loop. This also functions as another touch point with the office so they remember who you are.



POST-AUGUST ACTIVITY

NOT JUST AUGUST: These activities are not limited to the month of August. The House of Representatives and the Senate often take a week per month for in-district work periods where these kinds of events can be set up. Links to the House and Senate calendars are [here](#).

Follow on Social Media: Members also often post some form of a schedule either on their congressional website or on social media, so keep an eye on those resources as well. This is useful for Senators and those with larger districts that often focus on a region at a time.

Staff Asking for a Tour: Occasionally, during meetings with congressional offices in DC, the office may ask about a possible site visit. ABC is happy to connect congressional offices with their respective blood centers to coordinate.

ABC Contact: For any general questions please feel free to reach out to ABC's Government Affairs Manager, Lorenzo Rodriguez at lrodriguez@americasblood.org.



OTHER RELATIONSHIP BUILDERS

Invite your legislator and key staff to visit your facility. With the legislator's permission, organize a photo-op during the visit and use the visit as a cover story for your blood center publication.

Also, tag them on your social media and share that they visited your facility. Send copies of any photos electronically to the staff, including, if possible, some taken with your logo prominent. (Legislators like to fill the walls of their offices with pictures of themselves with constituents.)

Note: Permission for the photographs and coordination with the legislator's staff BEFORE the event is very important.

Invite your legislator to special recognition ceremonies. Ask your legislator to help present awards to special donors. And, if appropriate, grant an award to the legislator and ask local media to cover the event. Note: you must be careful to clear and coordinate such coverage with the legislator's press staff in advance of the event/meeting.

Invite your legislator to participate in blood drives and other community events organized by the blood center. Particularly if your legislator is supportive, a community event in his or her honor would be helpful and bolster such support.

Keep the district offices up to date on your blood drive schedules. Ask them if they would advertise these schedules in their reception areas.

Provide blood center promotional materials. Ask the district offices to display your blood center poster and brochures in their reception areas.

Put your legislator on your mailing list. Include key staff in the district offices as well as the Washington office.



KEY LINKS YOU SHOULD KNOW

Valuable information about Congress can be found online. Listed below are just a few places to look for updates on congressional activity and for ways to reach your elected officials online.

<http://www.Congress.gov>

The Federal Web Locator. Provides full-text bills, status reports, and the complete Congressional Record.

<http://www.house.gov>

A guide to the House of Representatives on the web, including contact information for legislators and their staffs.

<http://www.senate.gov>

A guide to the Senate on the web, including contact information for legislators and their staffs.

<https://www.federalregister.gov/>

The Federal Register on-line. Offers a fully searchable version of the Federal Register.

<https://www.regulations.gov/>

Regulations.gov is where most federal agency comment letters are submitted online. It is also a great place to find copies of rules that can be commented on.

<http://www.rollcall.com/>

Roll Call online. Roll Call is the newspaper for Capitol Hill, covering the latest news on people, politics and the process. Roll Call provides an inside perspective of how Congress works.

<https://www.politico.com/>

Politico is another newspaper for Capitol Hill. If you are interested in broader issues they have a number of great newsletters you can subscribe to including Pulse, which covers general health care issues.

<http://www.piperinfo.com>

The State & Local Government Page provides comprehensive links to state government resources. In addition to state and local governments, it also provides links to regional governments, tribal governments, and various state-level agencies.



GRASSROOTS HANDBOOK

About America's Blood Centers

Founded in 1962, America's Blood Centers (ABC) is the national organization bringing together community-based, independent blood centers across North America. These organizations operate in more than 1,100 communities and provide close to 60 percent of the U.S. and a quarter of the Canadian blood supply.



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