

Top Ten Tips for Effectively Using a Member of Congress' Town Hall Meeting

One of the most effective – and most underutilized – ways to communicate directly with Members of Congress is to attend their town hall meetings. Almost every Member holds these events during “District Work Periods” (the time when they are at-home) to elicit input and get a sense of the priorities and concerns of their constituents.

A **Town Hall Meeting** is a concept that originated in New England, when everyone in the town showed up to speak their piece and then vote on a particular issue. Today, with large heterogeneous communities, town hall meetings are held so that people can inform elected officials in their decision-making. Town hall meetings hosted by Members of Congress can be held in a variety of locations, such as a community center, a veterans’ hospital, a local community college auditorium, or a church or synagogue. Some Members of Congress are even conducting town hall meetings by phone or the Internet.

Because Members pay particular attention to the attendees of these meetings, participating in this process allows you to bring forward concerns and priorities in a public forum and amplify your voice with Members of Congress. Members of Congress take to heart what they hear directly from constituents who make the effort to show up at a town hall meeting; attendance shows a commitment to this issue. From the other side of the podium, Members see attendees first and foremost as concerned voters. In addition, the media often attends these meetings, providing another opportunity to spread your message and highlight your concerns

Some town hall meetings may be centered on a specific issue agenda (i.e. Social Security, Medicare prescription drugs, etc.), while most of these gatherings tend to be more freewheeling and/or offer an opportunity for general comments/questions at the end.

While some of the steps outlined here may seem quite obvious, when combined, they will guarantee that your attendance at a Congressional town hall meeting will have longer term benefits and be beneficial for the Dermatology Nurses’ Association.

1. Prepare in advance with your specific question. Bring supporting materials, if you have them, which you can provide to the staffer who will be traveling with/accompanying the Member. Also, be sure to avoid long, drawn out questions and do not use jargon or acronyms that people may not know – you do not want to annoy or alienate the Member, staff, audience, or media.
2. Upon arriving at the town hall meeting, check to see whether there is an established procedure for the meeting. For example, most offices will provide a place for constituents to sign in. Often there is a separate sign up sheet for individuals who would like to ask questions. *Remember: check with the staff when you arrive about the proper procedure and be sure to comply.*
3. Clearly identify yourself and your affiliation with DNA. Let them know whom you are representing. Unlike meetings on Capitol Hill where the Member and staff know with whom they are meeting, anyone can show up at a town hall meeting. *Consider your introduction to be an integral part of your question.*
4. It goes without saying, but be polite and professional. *Remember: even if the Member does not agree with you or evades your question and it is frustrating, you are most effective by being polite, calm, and persistent.*

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5. Ask for a response to your question. If she/he cannot give you a response, let the Member know you will be arranging another opportunity for further discussion and that you look forward to a response at that time. The point is not to embarrass the Member, but to engage him/her and seem reasonable. *Remember: you can always follow-up from your question at the town hall meeting with a formal letter. You should reference your attendance at the meeting, giving the date and location, and ask for follow-up from your inquiry.*
6. Use your judgment. The dynamics of town hall meetings can be shaped by factors beyond your control. If the audience is riled up over an issue unrelated to the concerns of DNA, and you get the feeling that participating would be counterproductive, it might be best to stay silent or take a pass when given the opportunity to ask a question. *Remember: you will have future opportunities to attend another town hall meeting and/or visit with the Member in a different setting. You can always follow-up with your question via a formal letter or arrange a meeting in the Member's district office.*
7. Depending on the setting and the number of people attending, make an effort to say hello and introduce yourself to the Member and the staffer before or after the meeting. Be sure to give them any materials you brought along with your personal/home contact information. *Remember: ask for the staffer's name and request a business card, so you know with whom you should follow-up.*
8. Report back to DNA on the results of the meeting. Identify any outstanding issues and information that the Member needs. Your report-back allows DNA to echo/follow-up on the message you delivered "at-home" to your Member in Washington and capitalize on your good work at the town hall meeting.
9. Follow-up. Send (by fax or e-mail, whichever is the office/staffers' preferred mode of communication) a letter to the Member and staff person. Remind them that you were at the town hall meeting, giving the date and location, and reiterate the issue you discussed. Even if you did not get to ask a specific question publicly, send a follow-up letter about your presence at the meeting. If there was anything that the Member or staff requested, be sure to provide that in your follow-up correspondence. *Please share your follow-up correspondence with DNA.*
10. Sign up to receive e-mail alerts from your Member. Visit their website (which can be found through www.house.gov and www.senate.gov) to be added to their e-mail list serve to ensure you are up-to-date on the latest news from your Member of Congress.

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Sample Questions for Town Hall Meetings

Remember to begin by introducing yourself: "My name is Mary Smith and I am a dermatology nurse living and working in Boston, Massachusetts."

1. What steps is Congress taking to lower the incidence of skin cancer?
2. A number of states have passed laws banning children under the age of 18 from using tanning beds. What can be done at the federal level to ensure all our children and teens are protected from harmful exposure to UV rays?
3. Tanning beds expose users to harmful UV rays which can cause skin cancer, yet these devices are currently classified by the Food and Drug Administration as low-risk devices along with bandages and tongue depressors. Will you weigh in with the FDA asking that they increase the risk classification of tanning beds to more accurately reflect the danger associated with their use?
4. As a nurse at the Boston Dermatology Clinic and a professor at Boston College's School of Nursing, I see the issues related to our nation's nursing shortage every day. We do not have enough nurses to meet the needs of our patients – and we do not have enough faculty members to train the next generation of nurses. The Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development Programs at the Health Resources and Services Administration, or HRSA, are critical to ensuring a robust and prepared nursing workforce. Will you pledge to support these programs during this year's budget cycle?
5. Following the enactment of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, where do you see our nation's health care system going over the next few years?