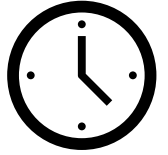


Background material to read first: [“Connecting with Congress Primer”](#)



Logistics

If your meeting is in-person in Washington, D.C., allow at least 30 minutes to travel between House and Senate office buildings. If possible, schedule Senate visits back-to-back and give yourself time to get to the House side of Capitol Hill and vice versa.

Planning meetings in 60- to 90-minute intervals per meeting should allow you about 20-30 minutes with the Member of Congress and/or their staff, time to travel to the next appointment, and time to reorganize for the next visit. You should be prepared to meet anywhere in the building—the office, the cafeteria, even the hallway. If your meeting is virtual, be prepared to either share a conference call number or video web link for the meeting or to use the video conferencing platform that the Member’s office prefers.

Substance

“Data makes you credible, stories make you memorable.”

As a trainee, advocate, parent, or researcher, you have an important story to tell about your experience. Members of Congress and their staff may not have heard of the LEND, UCEDD, or IDDRC Centers and Programs, and you play an important role in educating them about the important work happening at these Centers. By telling that story, you can also inform Members of Congress of the importance of funding these important programs and other programs for people with disabilities, and contribute to changing communities for people with disabilities.

You should have a solid level of familiarity and comfort with your talking points to ensure a good visit. Share about your LEND, UCEDD, or IDDRC in general, the role of trainees and researchers, how people in your role help people with disabilities, and how they will continue to improve services and supports. If possible, bring evidence-based research that supports your experience.



Remember that your role is to educate your Member of Congress or their staff about why that issue is important to you; you should not ask them for anything (support, votes, a commitment) in return, as that is considered lobbying. If you are being paid with or traveling on federal funds you cannot lobby.

[Read more about educating versus lobbying here.](#)

How Should You Prepare to Share Your Story?

- a. **Connect your experience to the larger issues.** Describe how being trained by your LEND, UCEDD, or IDDRC to be a leader in your discipline is going to change lives in your community. You can [use this elevator pitch template](#) to frame your story and connect it back to a bill or funding that the Member has influence over. **(Remember: you can educate them about the importance of funding but not ask them for more funding.)**

- b. **Keep it concise.** There are many areas of concern for people with disabilities. Pick 2-3 to discuss with the Member of Congress or their staff. If you want to talk about a specific bill or issue, share why it is important and its potential impact on your state or territory for people with disabilities.
- c. **Include a personal story**, especially if you are a person with a disability or if you have a family member with a disability. Connecting policies to people not only makes your meeting stand out among the hundreds that Members of Congress and their staff have each year, but it reminds everyone that abstract policies have real world effects.
- d. **Keep it local.** Bring district- or state-specific information and facts, especially information that cannot be found online, such as personal stories or internal research. Position yourself as a long-term, local resource for Members of Congress and their staff. It is important to always share with them how federal funding is used in their state or territory. It tells them what is important to you in the yearly federal budget and appropriations process.
- e. **Know the legislative basics.** You should know which federal laws created your Center or Program and authorize funds for it:
 - **UCEDDs:** Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Assistance Act
 - **LENDs:** Autism CARES Act
 - **IDDRCs:** Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development within the National Institutes of Health
 - **Projects of National Significance:** Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Assistance Act
 - **TPSIDs:** Higher Education Opportunity Act
- f. **Prepare your materials.** For each person you meet with, bring a branded folder that contains data, brochures, pictures of individuals, pictures of your Center, etc. that will support your points and make your story memorable. Be prepared to leave a copy of your materials with your Member of Congress or their staff, along with your business card and/or your Center's business card so they can follow up with any questions or if they need more information. You should also invite your Member of Congress or the staff to visit your Center.

How Should You Prepare to Connect with Your Member or their Staff and Make the Most of the Visit?

Do your research. Research your Member of Congress' legislative history and voting record on the issues you are discussing. Find out which committees your Members on Congress are on to help make decisions. Committees hear about bills and decide whether to make changes to them—called amendments—before bills are voted on by all Senators or Representatives. You can use the Member's website to find out what is important to them as well as the committees they serve on. Their newsroom or press releases page will help you understand where their positions on certain issues, and what they prioritize. You can use [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov) to find out their voting records and what bill they are sponsoring or cosponsoring. It is important that you know whether or not they are

supportive of the issues you care about so that you can have a productive conversation with the Member of Congress or their staff.

- a. Knowing what your Member of Congress **already** supports, sponsors, or cosponsors is very important in being efficient and effective in your conversations on Capitol Hill. For example, you should not spend time trying to convince a Member of Congress or their staff of the importance of phasing out subminimum wage if that Member of Congress has already cosponsored the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act.
- b. **Be ready to educate.** Members of Congress or their staff might not know about your Center or Program. You can and should educate them about what is happening to people with disabilities in the state or territory. It helps them understand why it is important to fund disability programs and how policy changes they make can improve the lives of people with disabilities. Remember that many Members of Congress and their staff may not be familiar with many of the terms and acronyms that we use in the disability community. Be sure to use full names instead of acronyms.

Remember...

Treat the staff with respect. While it may be nice to have the Member of Congress in the room, you always want your issue heard by the staff member who covers this issue in depth for the Member of Congress. That staff member can inform and influence the Member's position on the issue. It is also important to not damage a relationship with your Members of Congress if you are upset with them or sad that they did not support a bill. Sometimes it is important to just not say anything or not say what you are actually thinking, especially if it is not nice. This includes communication in-person and on social media. If you can build a good relationship, it could be beneficial for you, your Member, your Center or Program, and others in your community.

After the Meeting

Send a thank you note to the Member of Congress and/or their staff to thank them taking the time to meet with you. If the Member of Congress or their staff asked you a question that you did not know the answer to during the meeting, include that information in your email.

Here is an example of a concise and educational script you could use to contextualize your position and work:

[Your Center's Name] connects the university to the community. Our work helps people with disabilities and their families to get the services and supports they need to live in the community. Our job is to meet the needs of people with disabilities through research, education, and service. Some of our projects include [highlight key projects]. [Your Center's Name] is one of 68 UCEDDs, 60 LENDs, and 15 IDDRCs that form a national Network. The Network works on many topics that affect the lives of people with disabilities, such as healthcare, education, employment, and improving other services and supports for people with disabilities. Our work supports families in all our communities since disability is a natural part of the human experience.

Relationship-Building with Members of Congress and their Staff

Meeting with your Member of Congress or their staff is an important way to make sure your views are considered by the office. Fostering strong relationships with those Members of Congress or staffers is a great way to facilitate future meetings when a new bill or issue arises on which you want your elected officials to know your views.

If a Member of Congress has a positive experience meeting with you, that could help you get meetings with other Members of Congress on committees over issues impacting people with disabilities. **Such committees include the House Ways and Means; House Energy and Commerce; House Education and Workforce; Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions; and Senate Finance Committees.** If you visit the Committee website, you can see if one of your Members of Congress is on that Committee. Building relationships with offices also helps future UCEDD, LEND, and IDDRC staff and trainees to continue those relationships.

Call or email and thank your Member of Congress for sponsoring or co-sponsoring a bill helps people with disabilities. Hearing from many people in your state or territory about bills will help staff know it is important. Additionally, you can thank them on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and tag their account.



A lot of information and data that gets posted on the Internet is not reliable or true and shares incorrect information because anyone can post online. The AUCD Network produces some of the most relevant, reliable, long-term, and useful data that the disability community and elected officials use because it is produced after a rigorous review process. **If you are part of a UCEDD, LEND, or IDDRC, you are part of a community that can proudly provide useful information and data.** It can be helpful to remember that the data many lawmakers hear about—and even might reference—is often data that AUCD is producing, and it is produced and made available due to federal funding. For example, AUCD produces this long-term data that is funded by the [Projects of National Significance](#) on employment, direct support professionals, home and community-based services, and cost for services. Learn more here.

You Are An Important Resource

Relationships with Members of Congress go both ways. You have an interest in educating your Member of Congress, so they understand what you and your Center or Program need. Your Member of Congress and their staff have an interest in better understanding issues like disability policy, health care, and education and want to know how federal funds and federal programs are being used in their state or district. Here are examples of how you can be an incredibly important resource to your Member of Congress and their staff:

- **Expert:** You are an expert on your own lived experience and on your work in your Center or Program. Members of Congress or their staff may reach out to gain your expertise and learn from you.
- **Witness:** During hearings, Members of Congress bring in people who have expertise on a particular topic or who have lived experience and would be affected by a bill or other

Congressional action. You may be offered the opportunity to share your story as a witness. Read more about [public hearings](#).

- **Verifier:** Members of Congress have staff whose job it is to publicize their work. Sometimes, reporters and members of the media want to hear directly from people who would be affected by bills or other Congressional actions. Your Member's Communications staff may ask you if you would be willing to share your story with a reporter, who would include it in the news.