

GUIDE TO TOWN HALL MEETINGS¹

Town Hall Meetings provide a forum for direct communication with Members of Congress. Almost every member schedules public events during recess from Congress – the time when members are at home instead of in Washington, DC – to learn more about constituents' concerns.

WHAT IS A TOWN HALL MEETING?

The **town hall meeting** originated in New England when everyone in the town showed up to offer opinions and to vote on a particular issue. Today, most town hall meetings are held so that ordinary citizens can influence elected officials in their decision making. Members of Congress host meetings in a variety of locations, such as community centers, local community colleges, and religious institutions. Attendees are invited to directly ask the member a question regarding an issue that concerns them.

Members **do pay attention to** the attendees of Town Hall Meetings. Your attendance and the issues you raise become priorities for Members of Congress when they see and hear directly from their constituents. Attendance shows both commitment and organizational ability from **potential voters**.

In addition, the media often covers Town Hall Meetings, producing further opportunities to increase awareness of national service issues.

A Town Hall Meeting is a fantastic forum to ask your elected official to support robust funding for national service programs. The more meetings you attend to thank a Member of Congress for past support and to inform them of current national service issues, the stronger your impact and the more powerful your relationship will be with the member and his/her staff.

It is important to note that Town Hall Meetings sometimes have different formats; they may be on a specific issue (i.e. prescription drugs, energy, etc), but almost all allow for open comments at the end. To guide you in attending a meeting, you will find ten steps below.

TEN STEPS FOR ATTENDING A TOWN HALL MEETING

1. The first step is to get on the **alert list** for your members' meetings. Most members will announce their schedule via mailings or e-mails to the district and often through the media. However, some offices will directly contact constituents who have expressed an interest in knowing this information. In fact, many offices will only provide the actual information on meeting times and locations directly to constituents. For example, Representative Elijah Cummings (D-MD) offers constituents the opportunity to subscribe to his constituent newsletter (which lists local events and appearances) at www.house.gov/cummings/.
2. If not on an alert list, you can call the local district office of your Members of Congress and ask if any Town Hall Meetings or appearances are scheduled. An easy way to learn the phone number of district offices is to visit www.Congress.org and enter your zip-code into their search engine.

¹ Advocacy materials from the National Psoriasis Foundation and the Oncology Nursing Society served as a model for the development of this information.

3. 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 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 follow it.*
4. **Be prepared** with your specific question. Bring supporting materials that you can provide to the staffer who accompanies the Member of Congress. Also, avoid long drawn out questions, and do not use jargon, acronyms or abbreviations, such as EdAward or CNCS, that people may not know – you do not want to alienate the member, staff, audience or media. *Remember: visit www.VoicesForService.org for Legislative Updates and Actions. Voices for National Service is available to assist you in your preparation – email info@voicesforservice.org*

5. **Clearly identify yourself** and your affiliation. Let them know who you are representing. Unlike meetings on Capitol Hill where the Member of Congress 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.

Good afternoon. My name is <<First Name Last Name>>, and I am a representative of <<organization>> from <<location>>. <<Explain affiliation to AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve America, or Senior Corps>>. Thank you for your past support of national service. I am concerned that the nation is not investing enough in <<national service program>>, which meets unmet community needs and builds stronger citizens for our democracy. I ask you to <<specific call for action or question>>.

6. **Be polite and professional.** Keep in mind that the media is probably attending and may well be another potential ally in your efforts. *Remember: even if the Member of Congress does not agree with you or evades your question and it is frustrating, you are most effective by being polite, calm and persistent.*
7. **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 national service, and you get the feeling that participating would be counter-productive, 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.*
8. 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 contact information. *Remember: ask for the staffer's name and request a business card so you know with whom you should follow-up.*
9. **Report back** to Voices for National Service on the results of the meeting. Identify any outstanding issues and information that the Member of Congress needs. Your feedback allows Voices to follow-up in Washington on the message you delivered “at-home” and to capitalize on your good work at the town hall meeting.
10. **Follow-up.** Send (by fax or e-mail, whichever is the office/staffer's 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. Let them know you will be in Washington in September (if you plan on attending National Service Hill Day) and look forward to meeting with them at that time. If there was anything that the member or staff requested, be sure to provide that in your follow-up correspondence.