



From Counties to Congress:

# Your Guide to Effective Federal Policy Advocacy in Washington, D.C.

# Counties as Intergovernmental Partners

County governments administer and help fund many federal programs, translating federal policy into direct services for residents. As the level of government closest to the people, counties see firsthand how federal decisions affect communities. Your perspective as a county official carries particular weight because you manage local budgets, oversee service delivery and understand the real-world impact of federal policy on the residents you both serve.

**This toolkit helps county leaders effectively engage with Members of Congress and their staff - whether you're visiting Washington, D.C., meeting in your district or connecting virtually.** You'll find step-by-step guidance on preparing for meetings, telling your county's story and building relationships with federal decision-makers. This resource includes practical tips on handling tough questions, following up and leveraging NACo's data and policy expertise. Whether this is your first time engaging Congress or you're a seasoned advocate, this toolkit will help you communicate county priorities and ensure federal policy reflects the realities counties face on the ground.

## Step 1: Define Your Objective

Start with a clear goal. Identify the specific bill, funding stream or policy issue and determine exactly what you are asking for. Your "ask" should be direct and actionable — for example, support or co-sponsor legislation, increase funding, oppose a proposal or include specific language in a bill. Focus on one to two primary issues per meeting and prepare two or three supporting points that reinforce each request.

To help refine your message, review NACo's policy briefs, advocacy updates and Policy Priorities to learn more about the policy backdrop and understand how your issue fits into broader county advocacy nationwide.

## Step 2: Know the Member and Their Priorities

Before reaching out, review your U.S. Representative's and Senators' committee assignments and policy interests. Tailor your message to align with their priorities and emphasize the impact on their district or state. Connecting your issue to local economic, public safety or health outcomes strengthens your case.

**Leverage bipartisan support:** If multiple Members from your state or region support an issue, mention it. Emphasize when county priorities have bipartisan backing — this can increase the likelihood of action.

NACo Government Affairs staff can also provide insights into where your Member stands on key county issues and how best to position your request.

## Step 3: Use Available Resources

You do not have to do this alone. Leverage data, research and policy analysis from NACo to strengthen your case. NACo data can help quantify local impacts and provide national context that reinforces your message.

County officials are also encouraged to reach out to NACo Government Affairs staff for assistance drafting talking points or other communications. NACo staff can help ensure your outreach aligns with current federal strategy, coalition efforts and active legislation on Capitol Hill. Coordinated messaging ensures consistency and maximizes impact.

**Coordinate with your state association:** Work with your state association of counties to ensure aligned messaging. If your state association has already weighed in on the issue, mention that to reinforce the ask.

## Step 4: Schedule and Prepare for the Meeting

Meetings can occur in Washington, D.C., in the district/state office or virtually. Contact the Member's office and clearly state the purpose of the meeting, who will attend and the issue to be discussed. If you have any issues reaching out to or hearing back from your Member, you can always contact NACo Government Affairs staff to help!

When preparing, structure your message simply:

- Brief introduction of yourself and your county
- Clear explanation of the issue
- Specific local example or data point
- Direct and concise ask

Ask for a 30-minute meeting to ensure there is adequate time to clearly present your key points, make your specific ask and allow for discussion. While you should request a meeting with the Member directly, scheduling realities may mean you meet with the legislative staffer who handles your issue area. These staff members often have the deepest understanding of specific policy details in their portfolio and play a key role in advising and briefing the Member on that issue area. Treat staff meetings with the same level of preparation and respect as Member meetings – staff influence is significant.



Contact your  
U.S. House Member



Contact your  
U.S. Senators

## Step 5: What to Bring to Meetings

Come prepared with materials that support your message:

- **Business cards** for everyone in your delegation
- **County fact sheet or one-pager** with key data about your county (population, budget, services provided)
- **NACo policy briefs and one-pagers** related to your issue
- **Local examples, photos or case studies** that illustrate the impact
- **Contact information** for follow-up
- **Small delegation (if possible):** Consider bringing a county elected official plus a department head (e.g., public works director, health director) to demonstrate depth of expertise

## Step 6: Tell Your County Story

Congress responds to concrete information. Share measurable impacts such as funding amounts, number of residents affected, service delivery challenges or cost burdens on the county. Pair data with a short real-world example that illustrates the stakes for constituents. Your constituents are also theirs, so leverage your local knowledge to explain the on-the-ground impacts of proposed or enacted policies for residents.

Where possible, reinforce your story with NACo data or national examples to demonstrate that your county's experience reflects broader trends across counties in the United States.

**Sample Introduction:** “Good morning, I’m **[NAME]**, **[TITLE]** of **[COUNTY NAME]**, which has a population of **[NUMBER]** and an annual budget of **[AMOUNT]**. We provide **[KEY SERVICES]** to our residents every day. I’m here today to discuss **[ISSUE]** and how it impacts our community.”

**Sample Ask:** “We’re asking you to cosponsor **[BILL NAME/NUMBER]**, which would **[SPECIFIC OUTCOME]**. This legislation is critical for **[COUNTY NAME]** because **[LOCAL IMPACT]**. NACo supports this bill, and counties across the country are facing similar challenges.”

## Meeting Best Practices

### Do:

- Arrive 5-10 minutes early
- Turn off or silence your phone
- Be respectful of time limits — staffers often have back-to-back meetings
- Speak conversationally, not from prepared remarks
- Listen actively and ask clarifying questions if needed
- Take notes on what the Member or staff says
- Bring multiple copies of materials in case there are additional attendees

### Don't:

- Read directly from talking points
- Overpromise what your county can deliver
- Speak for other counties without data
- Be confrontational, even if the Member disagrees
- Take up extra time if the meeting is running over
- Lose focus by bringing up more than two issues per meeting



NACo members speak to the Congressional Bipartisan Mental Health Caucus about needed reforms to IMD policies.

## Step 7: Follow Up and Build the Relationship

Send a thank-you note within 24–48 hours, restating your request and providing any additional materials or data promised. Advocacy is ongoing — continue sharing updates, invite Members to visit county facilities during district work periods and maintain communication with legislative staff.

**Sample Thank You Email:** “Dear **[Member/Staff Name]**, Thank you for meeting with me today to discuss **[ISSUE]**. As I mentioned, **[COUNTY NAME]** is **[BRIEF RECAP OF KEY POINT]**. I’ve attached **[MATERIALS PROMISED]** for your review. Please don’t hesitate to reach out if you have questions or need additional information. I’m always happy to serve as a resource on how federal policy impacts counties. Sincerely, **[NAME]**”

Advocacy is ongoing — continue sharing updates, invite Members to visit county facilities during district work periods and maintain communication with legislative staff.

### District engagement ideas:

- Invite the Member to tour county facilities (e.g., 911 centers, roads/bridges projects, hospitals, emergency operations centers)
- Offer to host a roundtable or town hall on county issues
- Mention upcoming district work periods as opportunities for follow-up visits

Keep NACo informed of your meetings and outcomes so staff can reinforce your message on Capitol Hill and track support for county priorities.



NACo leaders convene in Washington, D.C. to advocate for Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) funding.

## Step 8: Digital and Social Media Follow-Up

Consider posting about your meeting on social media (tagging the Member if appropriate and if the meeting was positive). Share photos from meetings to build visibility for county advocacy and demonstrate engagement to your constituents.

**Sample Social Post:** "Great meeting today with **[Rep./Sen. NAME]** to discuss **[ISSUE]** and how it impacts **[COUNTY NAME]**. Grateful for their time and commitment to working with counties on **[PRIORITY]**. #CountyGovernment #Advocacy"

### What Happens After Your Meeting?

Understanding the legislative process helps manage expectations:

- **Bills move slowly:** Even with strong support, legislation can take months or years to pass
- **Committee action matters:** Bills must pass through committee before reaching the floor
- **Your engagement matters throughout:** Sustained advocacy — not one-time asks — is what moves policy forward
- **Staff influence is significant:** The staffer you met with will brief the Member and help shape their position
- **Your role doesn't end after one meeting:** Continue to provide updates, share constituent stories and reinforce your ask as the legislative process unfolds

## Common Questions from Members and Staff

Be prepared to answer:

- "How many people in your county does this affect?"
- "What's the cost to your county if this policy changes?"
- "Do other counties in our state/district support this?"
- "What's the alternative if this bill doesn't pass?"
- "How does this align with **[OTHER PRIORITY]**?"

## Day of Meeting Checklist

- Confirm meeting time and location the day before
- Arrive 5-10 minutes early
- Bring all materials (business cards, policy briefs, data profiles)
- Review your talking points one more time
- Silence your phone
- Introduce everyone in your delegation at the start of the meeting
- Take notes during the meeting
- Thank the Member/staff at the end
- Send thank you email within 24-48 hours

## Quick Preparation Checklist

- Clear and specific asks
- Two to three supporting points
- Collect local data and stories
- Review Member's committee assignments and priorities
- Coordinate with NACo Government Affairs staff on meetings, data and talking points
- Follow-up plan
- Coordinate with state association of counties

**Bottom Line:** Effective engagement with Congress is clear, focused and relationship-driven. By pairing local expertise with NACo's policy knowledge and data insights, county officials can help ensure federal policy reflects on-the-ground realities and the needs of residents. Your voice matters. Your story matters. Your county matters.

**Scan the QR code to access NACo's full advocacy toolkit with in-depth background, current status, talking points and more on key county priorities for your congressional meetings.**



## Tools for Counties



NACo Key  
Advocacy Initiatives



NACo County  
Explorer



NACo 2026  
Policy Priorities



NACo American County  
Platform & Policy Briefs



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