Handy Dandy Wisconsin Legislature Tip Sheet

DO:

* Be clear about what you want, be brief. Say your piece (2 minutes tops), then stop.
* Come prepared. If possible, look at the bio of the member so you know something about them when you meet. Connect your info to their district as much as possible.
* Print a current directory or confirm the room. Legislators (members) move.
* Pronounce the legislator’s name correctly. You can call the office and just ask, or go to this handy site: <http://www.misspronouncer.com/legis.html>
* Include **a phone number** with emails, messages, letters. Much easier for staff or the legislator to pick up the phone than develop a reply in writing.
* Respect time. If your meeting time is 20 minutes, take the initiative to wrap up when your timeframe ends. (However, don’t interrupt the legislator.)
* Treat legislators and staff like the people they are---public servants with a wide variety of backgrounds.
* Know that staff cannot discuss campaign issues on state time.
* Put it in writing. Emails or handouts make it easier to review what you’ve said and want.
* Try to consider the unintended consequences of legislation you may strongly support.
* Invoke their self-interest. Does the legislator serve on a board that would be interested in what you have to say? If you live or work in the district, do you have a story that explains why you oppose a bill? What would make your insight important to this legislator?
* Understand that all correspondence is subject to open records requests, if they are retained by the office.
* Let your enthusiasm and pride show. Even if you don’t cover everything, the connection you establish (or enforce) today is just as important as the issue.

DON’T:

* Assume that a legislator knows something already. We see drafts of about 1500 bills each session, and that’s only the items that get a bill number. Briefly explain what you are here to talk about, and then present your information and views.
* Assume the legislator doesn’t see/read everything. Most of the time, they do.
* Think we ignored you on purpose. We are human and staffs are small. If your email or call slipped through the cracks, we love it when you call to follow up. Please do.
* Use “As you know,” too much. Most of the time, legislators don’t know. They want to listen to your perspective; you don’t need to convince them that you think they know more than they do.
* Believe the news. Not entirely. Even quotes can be wrong. If you want to know what a legislator said in an article, or their views on a bill or issue, just ask.
* Take busy personally. Every job has layers of priority, and those layers shift. If your meeting is moved or cancelled, ask if it can be rescheduled in the Capitol or the district.
* Hijack a meeting. If you are part of a group meeting to discuss an issue/topic, do not bring up an unrelated, inflammatory issue and get into it with the legislator. Contact the office on your own time for that.

*Note:* Do not assume everything comes down to partisanship. The bill may have ramifications you don’t see. No one forces members to vote or draft a bill in a way the legislator doesn’t want. Really. Members live in their districts and see people at the grocery store or schools who will ask them why they voted the way they did, and the member must answer. They know this, and don’t make decisions in ‘lockstep,’ contrary to what the media and/or bloggers tend to say. Please respect a legislator’s opinion, whether or not you agree with it. We respect yours.

A good office visit

*(These are tips for an ideal visit---flexibility is always welcome!)*

* Let the office know ahead of time who will participate in the meeting and where they are from. If you want to discuss specific bills, please tell us ahead of time, so we can research them.
* Make sure you know the correct office number.
* Just walk in. You don’t need to knock on any legislative office doors.
* Be on time. If you are early, ask if meeting sooner is an option. If it isn’t, say you will wait in the hall.
* We understand if folks get lost in the building. Just call if you’ll be late, if you can.
* When you come in, say “Hi, I’m Jane Smith with Fox Valley Technical College. We have a 1:30 appointment with the Senator.” (you may not be the only appt, so don’t assume we know who you are.)
* Be gracious if your meeting now includes only staff and not the legislator.
* Bring extra copies of any handouts in case staffers sit in on the meeting.
* Feel free to ask the staffer if you have the correct room number of your next legislative meeting….and how to get there from here!
* Send an email in the next few days thanking them for the meeting and recapping what you said. Indicate your willingness to talk or serve as a resource in the future. (again, including your contact info with **a phone number**.)

A not so good office visit

* Attitude of defensiveness, condescension. Each Assembly District has over 57,000 people (1 or 2 staff) and Senate districts 172,000 (about 4 staffers). Some of those people will disagree with your viewpoints.
* Not showing up, with no explanation—ever.
* Rambling without saying what you hope to get from the visit.
* Threatening of any kind.
* Gossiping or burning bridges among legislators. The person you meet today could be very important to you in the future. *--Diane Handrick 2/19/2018*