

# In-District Legislator Visit Packet

You don't need to travel to Washington, DC or Richmond to get involved in advocacy work in Virginia. Reaching out to your public officials by visiting their district offices out of the legislative session can also be effective. You can influence MS issues, while staying close to home. Use the following tips and template materials to help.

If you need additional information or support during the course of planning your visit, feel free to contact Ashley Chapman, Virginia Statewide Advocacy Manager:

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## The Basics When Visiting With Your Legislator

**Reasons to reach out to your legislators:** As their constituent, your public officials want to hear from you. Scheduling a visit in their local office is an easy first step. Use the meeting to introduce yourself as someone living in his or her district. Share your story and talk about the priority issues in your jurisdiction, as well as any other issues that impact you. The meeting can be casual and brief. Then you can start to build an individual relationship with your legislators and key decision makers. By simply reaching out, you can advance MS issues in Virginia.

**Ideal times to visit:** You can (and should) communicate with your federal, state, or community officials at any time through their district office. Many state legislators hold regular office hours, inviting their constituents to stop by. During a recess or work period, federal and state legislators often host town halls or listening sessions in their districts. Feel free to attend these sessions and ask questions. If the legislator is not available in the office, speaking with staff members can be just as effective as meeting with the legislator him or herself.

**Calling to schedule a visit.** We recommend scheduling an in-person meeting with the legislator in the office. Initially, you may want to send an email requesting a specific date or time for a visit with your representative. After sending an email request, you will most likely need to follow up with a phone call. Be sure to schedule your visit in advance, as offices are not always fully staffed. It is best to set up the meeting at least three weeks prior to when you'd like to visit. After your visit is scheduled, be sure to contact Ashley Chapman to make sure you have all the materials and information you need when visiting your legislator. *See sample scheduling e-mail and call script on page 5.*

**When you visit.** Be prepared. Practice what you want to say beforehand. Bring a camera and take photos, even if you are meeting with staff. Remember to dress professionally. *Review additional tips on page 6.*

**Share your personal story.** The best way to start a conversation with your public official is to simply share your story about what it is like to have MS or to have a close friend or family member who has MS. You are the expert on your story and how issues affect your life. If your legislator asks you a question that you aren't sure how to answer, it is okay to follow up later. Be sure to write the question down, and contact Ashley Chapman if you need help finding the

answer. *See tips on starting a conversation and sharing your personal story on page 8.*

**When you leave.** Be sure to provide a packet of information and include your business card. If you do not have a business card of your own, or if you would prefer an MS activist business card, Ashley can develop one for you. After you schedule your visit and inform Ashley of the date of your visit, you will be mailed leave behind materials that you can leave with your legislator. Other than the chapter specific information that we will send you to leave behind, feel free to write down some information about your personal story to leave behind with your legislator.

**After the visit.** Follow up with a thank you note. *See tips and sample thank you note on page 11.* Tell Ashley how it went. *Fill out the visit report form on page 12 and send it to Ashley at the Central Virginia Chapter office along with any photos you took during the visit.*

**Build the relationship.** You can continue to build the relationship by extending your conversation with the legislator. Send letters or postcards as issues develop or your story changes. Call if you're concerned about another issue. Or invite them to your self-help group, to visit the chapter, to join your walk or bike team, or to another event. You can do this any time throughout the year. When a legislator receives five or six constituent contacts about an issue, it elevates that issue and can really create change.

## Scheduling a Visit with your Legislator

Even when working in their district office, legislators and staff members have busy schedules. Before trying to schedule your visit, have a few possible meeting days and times ready, but be prepared to be flexible if your legislator is not available at that time.

Each office is different, but most offices prefer to receive an email request for in person visits. Most offices have a scheduler who will take care of scheduling your visit. Before sending your email, call your legislator's office and ask who you should send an email to in order to schedule a visit with your legislator.

Send an email to the scheduler. *See sample email on page 5.*

If you do not hear back within a few days, follow up with a phone call to the scheduler. If you are not able to reach him or her, be persistent in following up. Eventually you will be able to schedule your visit. *See sample phone script for scheduling visits on page 5.*

After you have a date and time for your visit, contact Ashley Chapman, the Virginia Statewide Advocacy Manager (Contact information on p. 1 of packet) and let her know when the visit is. If Ashley is available, she will try to attend the visit with you or find a staff member in your local chapter to attend. If you have any questions, she can answer them at this time and she will also mail leave behind materials that you can leave with your legislator.

Send a confirmation email a few days before your visit, to make sure that your legislator is still available and the meeting time has not changed.

## Sample Email and Call Script

**Here is a sample of an email that can be sent to schedule a visit with your legislator.**

Dear (scheduler's name),

My name is (insert name here) and I am an MS Activist and a constituent in (insert legislator's name)'s district. I would like to schedule a visit with (insert legislator's name) on (insert date here) to discuss the legislative agenda of the National MS Society in Virginia, and to discuss how MS impacts my life. Please let me know if the legislator is available on this day. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
(Your name here)

**You will most likely need to follow up your email with a phone call. Below is a call script that can be used when you call your legislator's office.**

YOU: "Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm trying to reach (scheduler's name). I sent an email on (insert date here) to schedule a visit with my legislator."

Staffer: "Okay let me get (scheduler's name) for you."

YOU: "Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I contacted you by email to schedule a visit with my representative."

Scheduler: "Okay, what date were you looking at?"

YOU: "I am looking at (insert dates here) but can be flexible depending on the legislator's schedule."

Scheduler: "The legislator is very busy but let's schedule a visit on (insert date here)."

YOU: "Thank you for your time. I am looking forward to it. If you need to reach me you can contact me at (insert your phone number here) or (insert your email here)."

## Tips for Visiting with Your Legislator

Get to know the legislator before you visit. Visit his or her web site, read their bio, and do a news search.

- Is he or she a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?
- What committee(s) does he or she serve?
- Is he or she the author of any recent, significant legislation?
- Does he or she share a common perspective regarding an issue important to you?

Arrive on time or early, but be prepared to wait. Day-to-day business can delay a legislator or staff.

Dress professionally. If you have a suit, wear it. If not, business attire is appropriate. You may even want to incorporate orange into your outfit to represent the National MS Society's color.

Identify yourself as your legislator's constituent. Provide your address and telephone number.

Don't be surprised if your meeting with the legislator turns into a meeting with staff. Meeting with staff and building that relationship can be just as effective. Oftentimes, the legislator is a generalist, who relies upon staff for issue expertise.

Rest assured that you are the credible expert on the effects of multiple sclerosis. Even if you don't know the specifics of an issue or piece of legislation, your personal story is most important. Relate your real-life experiences to the reasons why you support or oppose the issue.

Rehearse your key points in advance and practice telling your story. If others are joining you, determine who will say what and when.

Be able to provide a brief and concise definition of multiple sclerosis. For example, "MS is believed to be an autoimmune disease that affects the central nervous system. Each person experiences the disease differently and there are a multitude of symptoms such as fatigue, heat sensitivity, vision loss and foot drop. Oftentimes, MS leads to disability."

Keep your conversation simple, concise, and clear. Avoid jargon and acronyms. Refrain from making assumptions. Do not presume those you visit with are versed in the issue important to you.

Be clear about whether you intend for the legislator to support a bill or oppose a bill. If so, what is the specific bill number? Explain what specific actions you would like your legislator to take.

Preserve your credibility. If you do not know the answer to a specific question, say so and offer to follow up later. Be sure to write down the question so you remember it. If you have problems finding the answer to the question, email Ashley at [ashley.chapman@nmss.org](mailto:ashley.chapman@nmss.org) and she can help you figure out the answer to it.

If appropriate, offer your collaboration on an issue that your legislator is working on. If your representative is working on one of our platform issues, we want to do all we can to help.

To conclude your meeting, thank him or her for visiting with you, provide your leave behind materials, and leave contact information. Be sure to send a thank you note in the mail after returning home from your visit. Sending a hand written note in the mail leaves more of an impression on your legislator, but if this is difficult for you, an email can be used as a substitute.

## **Tips for Starting a Conversation and Sharing Your Personal Story**

First, introduce yourself and mention where you live. This will break the ice, and make sure they know you are a constituent.

Thank the legislator or staff for their time.

Then, share your personal story about multiple sclerosis. For example: “Let me start by telling you a little about myself. Are you familiar with multiple sclerosis?”

Talk about your connection to multiple sclerosis. Explain MS, if they are unfamiliar. Share your experiences and the impact on your life. Be brief but descriptive.

Transition into a discussion of one or two issues that are important to you. Explain your experience with the health care system. Talk about your access to local health care or community resources. Or, explain how your life has been impacted by prescription drug costs, disability rights, or any of the other platform issues in your state.

If it helps, use one of these transition phrases:

- Because I live with MS, I’m most concerned about....
- I’m sure you can understand why I feel strongly about MS issues. The most important thing to remember is....
- People living with MS face many challenges, but if I could ask you to change one thing it would be....

At the end, ask if you can answer any questions. Then conclude the conversation by thanking the legislator or staff again for their time.

Remember to also be prepared to listen and take notes if necessary. Legislators can be very inquisitive and may ask questions as well as share their own stories and the issues they’re currently working on that may be related to your experiences.

## Legislative Issues to Discuss

Although it is perfectly acceptable to bring up your own policy concerns during your visit with your legislator, I would like to encourage you to discuss some of our priority issues during your visit. By discussing these issues, you will help raise awareness of what we are working on prior to advocacy day, and may help us to gain momentum so that we may have legislative success.

### **Some of our priority issues in the state of Virginia include:**

#### Establish a Virginia General Assembly Multiple Sclerosis Caucus

The impact of multiple sclerosis (MS) on individuals in the Commonwealth spans many critical current issues in the Virginia General Assembly. The establishment of a Virginia General Assembly Multiple Sclerosis Caucus would create an arena for members of the General Assembly to actively seek creative solutions for critical health care, disability, transportation, and other issues affecting people with MS, as well as raise awareness and increase education about MS, helping us move us closer to a world free of this disease.

#### Advocate for Sensible Budget Reductions

Given the current financial situation within the United States and the Commonwealth of Virginia, the state is in the process of reducing many social program budgets. During these cuts, the VA CAN (Citizen's Action Network) believes that protecting services for the most vulnerable Virginians should be foremost.

#### Improve Access to Accessible Housing for People with Multiple Sclerosis

Many people with MS have disabilities that limit their mobility and require ambulatory aids, scooters, and/or wheelchairs. The VA CAN will work to educate representatives about the lack of affordable, accessible housing throughout Virginia, seek to build relationships with state housing agencies, and lobby for a Housing Trust Fund to be established in the state.

#### Promote a Prescription Assistance Plan for People with MS

Prescription drugs help people with MS better manage symptoms and progression, enabling these individuals to remain active, employed, and better able to provide for themselves and their families. Chronic disease prescriptions should be tiered to be affordable to the insured as well as the uninsured. Currently, Virginia is one of only 10 states that does not offer a state assistance plan to help pay for prescription medications. The VA CAN will work to

educate representatives about this issue and develop a prescription drug assistance plan for people with MS.

#### Improve Accessible Transportation

Individuals with disabilities should have reliable and accessible means to transportation that will enable their full participation in the workforce and in community life. This includes supporting improved access and expansion of accessible transportation for individuals seeking health care, employment, and leisure activities beyond the boundaries of the current public transportation system. There is a critical link among transportation, housing and employment - policy and program decisions should be made with full recognition of this linkage.

## Sample Thank You Note

After your visit is over, be sure to send a thank you note to your legislator or the staff member you met with in his or her office. This thank you note helps leave an impression on the office and reminds them of your story and what you discussed. I would encourage you to send a hand-written thank you note in the mail to the person you met with. If writing is difficult for you, an email may be used as a substitute to a hand written note.

### **Here is a thank you note you can use as a sample:**

Dear (legislator or staff member you met with),

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me on (insert date here). I enjoyed meeting with you and discussing MS priority issues in Virginia. I look forward to working more with you in the future.

Sincerely,  
(your name here)

It is also appropriate to include a specific reminder of the conversation you had with the legislator or staff member. For example,

“As mentioned, I will follow up with you in a few weeks regarding the transportation issue we discussed.”

# Legislator Visit Form

Please return one copy to Ashley Chapman, the Virginia Statewide Advocacy Manager for each visit you make. These forms help us keep track of which legislators are supportive of our platform issues (you may use additional sheets if necessary)

**Your Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of legislator:** \_\_\_\_\_ **District/State:** \_\_\_\_\_

Name of person met with/title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Visit: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Other participants at meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

**Topics discussed:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Comments:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Follow up needed:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_