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## A Guide to Setting Up Congressional Site Visits

### August 2011

Thanks for your interest in meeting with your Congressional members while they are home for the recess to show them the great work of Promise Neighborhoods. The information below outlines the process for undertaking a site visit with your Senators and Representatives. If you have any questions, please contact Shantha Susman at the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink: [Shantha@policylink.org](mailto:Shantha@policylink.org); 212.502.6498.

#### Overview

Having a member of Congress tour your program will have a positive impact and will help accomplish both Promise Neighborhood program goals in Washington and your goals at home. This resource will assist you and provide details on every aspect of the tour and the process for getting started. Below are some general guidelines and recommendations for planning a congressional visit to your site.

- **Plan Ahead:** Having a member of Congress visit is a chance to show off your students and your contributions to the community. It is often good to have a “Welcome Congressman X” banner or a sign in an area with high visibility. Create an agenda to follow, talking points, and prepare relevant data. Always have a camera to take pictures of the tour.
- **Work Together:** The Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink is here to assist you with congressional outreach in any way possible. We can provide you with federal budget and legislative information to increase relevance and productiveness of the visit. Please contact Shantha Susman for more information: [Shantha@policylink.org](mailto:Shantha@policylink.org).
- **Track the Clock:** Given the demands on the member’s time, it is best to keep the visit concise and on schedule. A walk through the day prior to the event is recommended to ensure that all participants understand their roles, know the purpose of the visit, are aware of the route that will be taken in and around the buildings, and know how much time they will be allotted for each portion of the presentation.
- **Prepare Everyone:** In addition to the key staff facilitating the scheduling of your congressional visit, it is important for all program participants and staff to be informed of the congressional visit and your expectations. The more prepared everyone is, the better the visit. Include

students in the program and to be sure they who reflect the diversity of your community. Students can put on a performance, display their artwork, read a poem, or act as greeters. You should also include a local business leader with whom your program has a positive working relationship. If an employer cannot attend, obtain a letter of support or testimonial to include with materials for the member of Congress.

- **Tour the Facility:** Your visit should include a very brief tour of the facility.

## Before the Visit

1. **Identify your program's member of Congress:** [WholsMyRepresentative.com](https://www.whosmyrepresentative.com)
2. **Identify upcoming Congressional recess periods:** [Know when members of Congress travel to their districts](#). These recess periods are the best times for members to visit constituents. Typical recess periods include: Most federal holidays, President's Day, Easter, Memorial Day, the 4th of July, and the entire month of August. In election years, Congress tends to adjourn in October, leaving the rest of the fall open for visits. Contact the Promise Neighborhoods Institute for other times Congress may recess.
3. **Invite your member of Congress to visit:** Due to the demands on members of Congress, their schedules fill up quickly. You should send the invitation letter on behalf of your program several weeks in advance. A sample letter has been provided for you below. The letter is then sent via email to the member's scheduler who handles events in the member's home district. Email is the preferred method of correspondence due to security concerns with hard mail.
4. **Follow up with the member's scheduler:** A few days after your email you should contact the member's scheduler to make sure they received the invitation.
5. **Confirm the date:** Try to accommodate a member's busy schedule; if the suggested date will not work, offer several dates/times as options.
6. **Establish a dialogue with member's scheduler:** Provide the member's scheduler with your contact information. Offer details of the visit: names, titles, programs, etc.
7. **Create a program fact sheet:** Your program fact sheet should include relevant information, including: current enrollment numbers; percentage of students by gender, race and age; highlights of student success; positive testimonials of current parents, community members or partners; and, interesting facts about your program. [A sample Promise Neighborhoods fact sheet can be found on the Promise Neighborhoods Institute website.](#)
8. **Assemble take-away materials:** Materials should be reflective of your program and should also include Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink materials.

9. **Coordinate with the congressional press secretary:** It is up to the member's office whether or not the press should be involved but you should suggest and issue a press release after the event if the press secretary does not want widespread coverage. If media coverage is agreeable with the member of Congress, a press release should be sent at least a week before the event followed by phone calls to key local press outlets. A sample press release is included. In addition, the member's visit should be featured on your website and in newsletters. Always take pictures of the member of Congress. These photos can be forwarded to the member of Congress, the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink, and could be included in a press release.

10. **Confirm with the member's scheduler:** The member's office may ask for more information about your program, as well as a schedule of events or a list of who the participants will be during the visit. Offer to provide all of this information. It is best to contact the scheduler one to two weeks in advance of the visit.

11. **Invite the education staffer or district office staff to accompany the member on the tour:** Staff are extremely important to the legislative process and to our advocacy efforts. Treat staff as you would treat the member of Congress.

12. **Perform a walk-through with key staff one day ahead of site visit:** The route should be mapped out so that the event and tour run smoothly and on time.

13. **Distribute schedules to everyone that will be involved:** Once the schedule has been finalized, distribute it to all participants and send a copy to the member's scheduler.

## During the Visit

1. **Greet the member of Congress and his/her staff (2-3 min).** Your program's director should be on hand to greet the member of Congress and his/her staff when they arrive on site. It is also preferable to have one or two students accompany the member and director on the tour. Remind staff and students ahead of time: DON'T debate policy or politics with the member, and DO be respectful—always. This is a great opportunity to show off your program.

2. **Tour your facilities (15-20 min).** Your program director should lead the tour. This is the best time to show your program "in action" to the member and his/her staff. It is good to include rooms where the program is in session or have short demonstrations set up with a faculty member and student to demonstrate what they have been learning. Be sure to quickly introduce the member to your staff. Be careful not to get delayed. The member of Congress will enjoy shaking hands with potential voters. Take the member of Congress and his/her staff wherever they request. Be prepared for the member to request to visit a room not on the agenda. Involve your students and staff in the tour. Members of Congress enjoy interacting with students, and doing so personalizes their visit. Members of Congress also like to see the benefits that your program is giving to the district, so invite a few key business leaders.

3. **Brief student program (15- 20 min).** Members of Congress enjoy seeing youth programs and having their pictures taken with children. If possible, have your students prepared to sing a song, read a poem, or perform a dance. While the presentation may be brief it will create a memorable impression of the work your program does every day.

4. **Meet with students, faculty and staff (10-15 min).** At the end of the presentation you should allow the member of Congress to have open interaction with your students, staff and partners. This should allow the member to make any remarks as well as answer any questions your students may have. Be sure to have one staff member prepared with a question in case there are no questions from the group. The question should not be about politics, policy or the budget, but instead focus on the member's impression of or questions about your program.

5. **DON'T give any gifts.** Due to the new lobbying and ethics rules on Capitol Hill, do not present the member or his/her staff with any gifts. The best thing you can give is an informational packet highlighting your program and the services you provide students.

6. **DON'T let the site visit run longer than the amount of time that has been allotted.** Be respectful of member's tight schedule and other commitments.

#### **After the Visit**

1. **Send the member a thank-you letter.** The thank-you letter to the member should be emailed to the staff that assisted you with the visit. Be sure to thank the staff in the cover email that includes the thank you letter as an attachment. A sample thank-you letter has been included.

2. **Report back to the Promise Neighborhoods Institute.** Please email us and let us know how the tour went: [Shantha@policylink.org](mailto:Shantha@policylink.org).

3. **Follow up.** If any additional requests were made by the member of Congress, follow up with his/her DC office with the requested information.

## Congressional Site Visit Checklist

- Identify member of Congress to invite for site visit
- Determine potential dates
- Email Invitation
- Call scheduler
- Confirm with scheduler
- Alert staff and students about the visit
- Develop the agenda for the site visit
- Identify “welcoming committee”
- Invite business leaders and community members
- Identify staff responsible for student performance
- Identify staff and rooms to highlight during tour
- Identify staff to prepare banner or welcoming sign
- Identify staff responsible for pictures
- Have a location already identified to snap a photograph of the Member with staff and children
- Address all security issues for outside guests in advance (sign-in sheet, nametags, etc.)
- Develop and compile “take away” packet of information
- Prepare press release
- Reach out to local press and other media outlets
- Conduct a “dry run” of the visit and work out any kinks
- Send thank-you note to the member of Congress, scheduler, and staff person
- Send any follow up materials that were discussed during the site visit
- Send email to the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink: [Shantha@policylink.org](mailto:Shantha@policylink.org)

## Sample Letter of Invitation

Date

The Honorable *[insert name]*

U.S. House of Representatives *or* United States Senate

Washington, DC 20515/20510

Dear Representative/Senator *[insert last name]*:

On behalf of *[name of program]*, we would like to invite you to visit between *[dates of congressional recess]* to tour our program to see firsthand the services provided to students. *[Name of program]* is one of the Promise Neighborhoods planning grantees and a premier program in your great state with an excellent record of helping children succeed in school and life. We would like to ensure that you have a chance to meet the students and partners who make *[name of program]* an invaluable resource in the community.

Again, I would like to encourage you to schedule time to visit *[name of program]* to interact with their students and faculty, and to observe the educational opportunities available to your constituents.

Please contact me if I can be of any assistance to you. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

## Sample Press Release

[Insert program logo]  
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Insert Date  
Contact: Name, Phone, E-mail

Representative Jane Doe Visits Program X  
Congresswoman Sees Benefits of Promise Neighborhoods

(Las Vegas, NV) – Congresswoman Jane Doe (R-NV) toured Program X today to see the opportunities available in this community. During the site visit, Congresswoman Doe met with program staff, students, and local business leaders to discuss the benefits of the Promises Neighborhoods program.

“We were so pleased to host Congresswoman Doe at our school,” stated Bill Smith of program X. “We appreciate all the work she has done on behalf of the children in our community. It was a wonderful opportunity for us to share information about our program with her.”

Congresswoman Doe also found the visit to be helpful: “These children are our future. It was great to see first-hand the education and support they are receiving to make them not only great students, but also great citizens.”

Program X is located in Las Vegas, NV. *(Add 2-3 sentence description here. Include picture with the press release.)*

## Sample Thank You Letter

Date

The Honorable (insert name)

United States House of Representatives *or* United States Senate

Washington, DC 20515/20510

Dear Representative/Senator [*insert last name*]:

On behalf of the students and faculty of [*insert name of program*], I would like to thank you for taking valuable time from your schedule to visit our program last week.

It was an honor and pleasure to meet with you and your staff. I hope you enjoyed the tour. More importantly, I hope you came away with a greater understanding of the kinds of programs [*insert name of program*] offers, the students who benefit from our presence in the community, and the local businesses with which we have a dynamic partnership.

Please use us as a resource as you tackle education issues this session in Congress.

We look forward to working with you and your staff in the coming months. Thank you again!

Warm regards,