



Congressional District Leader Best Practices

NARFE members, through approval of a resolution at the 2016 National Convention and in the 2017 Strategic Plan, have embraced establishing Congressional District Leaders (CDLs) and Senatorial Leaders (SLs) within their federations. The goal of a CDL is to develop and maintain a relationship with your Member of Congress and his/her staff to further the NARFE Advocacy Program. This Issue Brief builds on the previous briefs on [Establishing CDLs](#) and [Responsibilities of an Effective CDL](#).

Your NARFE federation has established a CDL/SL structure, and you're now serving as a NARFE CDL or SL. You've reviewed your duties, are honing in on your skills and are working with your congressional member's office regularly. Here are some best practices to take your advocacy efforts to the next level.

Have an “ask” and define your message carefully. Don't communicate with a congressional office only for the sake of communicating. Whether it's a meeting, an email or a phone call, have a clear “ask.” Keep your ask simple, clear and specific, and include the action you would like your legislator to take. This can be vocal opposition to a policy proposal or co-sponsorship of a bill NARFE supports. Clear, concise messages are more likely to be remembered and considered by the legislator. Use the materials on the NARFE [Advocacy page](#) to structure the message.

Set the tone. Make sure the member of Congress and his/her staff are aware of NARFE's legislative priorities and what you plan to discuss prior to any meeting. Send materials to the staffer before the meeting so he/she can be prepared to talk about the legislator's position.

Utilize various communication channels. Recognition of NARFE's position can be strengthened through social media, email messages, and calls from NARFE advocates throughout the state or district. Ask other NARFE members to use NARFE's Legislative Action Center to contact their legislators about the issues. If NARFE members from across the district/state are contacting the legislator, your meeting will strengthen those messages and elevate NARFE's voice.

Include a personal story in any correspondence to help influence your legislator to support NARFE's legislative priorities. Humanize the issues and explain first-hand how you or other constituents would be affected by the legislation you discuss. When holding a meeting, bring another NARFE member with a compelling personal story.

Ask for the staffer's card, and have your own NARFE card handy. When introducing yourself to the staff person who works on federal issues, ask for his/her business card. Usually the best way to contact congressional staff is via email.

Wear a NARFE name badge and provide your business card when meeting with a congressional office or attending a community event in your NARFE capacity.

For questions or more information, including scheduling CDL/SL training, please contact Molly Checksfield, NARFE Grassroots Program Manager, at mchecksfield@narfe.org/571-483-1263.



Use the phone when time is of the essence. Although emails are preferred for day-to-day communication, pick up the phone to discuss urgent matters when legislation is being considered.

Arrange some meetings when Congress is not in session. You will likely have more of the legislator's time and attention when he/she is in the district/state.

Don't be afraid to say "I don't know." Let the congressional office know you will get back to them on any question for which you do not immediately have an answer. This is preferable to guessing and possibly supplying an incorrect answer.

Follow up with a thank-you note after your meeting, and take that opportunity to answer any outstanding questions that came up at your meeting.

Organize a coordinating and communication structure. It is helpful to create a communications system that allows you to send information to NARFE members and mobilize action quickly around the district/state. Building a network of advocates helps to target your messages and actions most effectively. Engage the chapter legislative chairs and other activists in the district/state to build a structure that works for you. One size does not fit all.

Know the keys issues inside out. This includes not only the position you are advocating, but the other side too. Know the congressional committees with jurisdiction over the issue, as well as the members who support NARFE's position and those who don't. Knowing the arguments against your position will not only help you prepare your case, but help you inform your legislator. Staff will often ask, "Where's the objection to what you're proposing?" Knowing how to answer that question shows the staff you take the issue seriously.

Familiarize yourself with the legislator's background. Review his/her biography and see if there's any way to build a connection. Maybe you grew up in the same general area, or went to the same school. Also, take note if the legislator has prior government experience at any level. Know his/her committee assignments and look for ways to connect your issue to the interests of those committees, as committee assignments usually reflect the legislator's interests. Use NARFE's [Legislative Action Center](#) to learn about your legislator's background.

Rally your allies. Recruit and organize other supporters of NARFE's position including individuals, organizations and agencies who are affected by the same policy. This includes vocal NARFE members and other organizations.

Be patient. Successful advocacy does not happen overnight. Building support for an issue takes time and effort on behalf of lobbyists, NARFE members, congressional staff and other stakeholders. Getting a piece of legislation through Congress takes time. Success should also be judged on whether the needle was moved or if the narrative changed, either of which often may be the best result.

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