



Talking Points for Visits with Elected Representatives

Visits to legislative offices for Head Start Day in Annapolis and Hill Day in Washington, DC, are a time for parents of Head Start* children, program staff, community partners, and Directors to share information about Head Start services, their personal experiences with the program, and the financial and socio-economic impact programs have on their community.

It is best to schedule an appointment in advance. A good opening to the conversation is to let the scheduler know you would like to meet with your legislator to discuss how important quality early childhood services are to families in your community. Ask to schedule a few minutes of the legislator's time on the day of the event.

Let the person you're speaking with know that Head Start Day in Annapolis is sponsored by the Maryland Head Start Association (or, if in DC, visits to Capitol Hill are coordinated with support from the National Head Start Association). If you are a constituent, introduce yourself as a constituent, identifying the community where you live.

Let them know you look forward to sharing information about the specific services at your program and discussing the needs of young children and their families in general. If the legislator is not available on the date of the event, let them know you would appreciate an appointment to speak with the legislative aide who focuses on health, workforce, and education issues.

Not having a prescheduled appointment does not mean you shouldn't stop by to share contact information and make an introduction. Tell them about the materials you have to share and see if they have a few minutes to discuss Head Start. Let them know you're part of a larger event planned as an opportunity to say thank you to legislators for the support they give to our state's youngest children. You are there to advocate for programs that help parents go to work and help children enter Kindergarten ready to learn.

During your meeting, you want to focus on your legislator's support of Head Start. The message should focus on money that is saved by communities and government agencies in the long run, or Return on Investment. Share personal stories from your program about positive outcomes for children and families.

Even if you were able to schedule your meeting personally with your legislator, last minute scheduling conflicts can occur. If that happens, lawmakers will ask their staff to take the meeting and it is not cause to take offense.

Whether you've had a full, sit-down, meeting or just dropped off some information, always be sure to thank the person you spoke with for their time.

How the Meetings Work

- 1. Be on Time and Prepared:** Legislators are often heavily scheduled when in Annapolis/the Capitol, with multiple appointments throughout the day and evening. Being prompt for your meeting allows you more time with the legislator to get through all of your discussion items. Being prepared will give you greater confidence to make the information you are sharing compelling and personal.
- 2. First Impressions:** The first thing you should say is “Thank you for meeting with us.” Introduce yourself and shake hands. Protocol requires you address your legislator by her/his title (example: Senator Jones or Delegate Smith).
- 3. Roles of Meeting Participants:** You will be with others from your program, one of you should be designated as the “meeting leader.” Your meeting leader will speak first, introduce you and others in the room, and help facilitate the meeting. While you all have information and experiences to share, time will be limited. The meeting leader should keep track of the time, take notes on the topics discussed, make note to prepare additional information that needs to be sent to the legislator as follow-up from the discussion or to be shared with MHSA or your program.
- 4. Meeting Tone:** You are there to share information – to educate legislators about the public value of Head Start. While you may express frustration and disappointment if they have not been in support of Head Start funding or legislation in the past, a persuasive conversation involves providing insight into what you know about the benefits of program services from having experienced them first-hand, and should not involve anger or political insults.
- 5. Stay on Message:** Many legislators like to begin the meeting by making a personal connection with you (they might make a reference to a home neighborhood or familiarity with a certain school). These exchanges help establish common ground, but can take away from limited meeting time if they go on too long. Keep the conversation on message that Head Start works and it is important that the legislator continues to support these comprehensive services.
- 6. Stay Strong.** Not all legislators support government funding of programs like Head Start, and may try to get you off message. You should not back down from your position of support for Head Start if a legislator begins to question the impact of Head Start or the need to maintain funding. If lawmakers have questions you were not prepared for, write down their concerns and MHSA can help to follow up with them.
- 7. Leave on a Positive Note:** As you wrap up the conversation, make sure you repeat one last time what action you hope the Legislator will take and then thank them for meeting with you. It is important that staff and Directors not make specific reference to voting on dollar amounts in legislation due to Hatch Act restrictions. But, they are able to reference the hope that legislators will continue to support such beneficial services. Do not forget to leave the packet of material you brought to the meeting.
- 8. Follow-Up:** Follow-up is *key* to successful advocacy efforts. Send a thank you letter to the legislator or staffer you met with, along with any additional information you pledged to provide.

There is a priority in discussion items established for advocacy on this day:

- First and foremost, thank your legislator, or their staff, for the support they have provided in previous votes for funding of Head Start programs.
- Second, educate legislators on the importance of the Non-Federal Share funds which come from the Maryland legislature as State Supplemental Funds. Let them know that programs could not continue to operate without these additional dollars provided from the state government because federal funding is only 80% of the annual budget. Encourage them to maintain funding at current levels so children will not have to be removed from the program and staff do not have to lose their jobs.
- Third, provide general information and advocacy on the state of Head Start in Maryland.
- Fourth, highlight any bills currently before the legislature which may have impact on Head Start children and the communities where they live. For example:
 - healthcare
 - college education tuition assistance
 - child care subsidy funding
 - nutrition services
 - employment and workforce training
- Fifth, reference collaboration with the broader early childhood development community. Highlight successful partnerships and efforts to maximize federal and state funding.
- And last but not least, invite them to visit your program. Tell them of any upcoming events or celebrations, or let them know that they are welcome to come learn more about the services at your program when in their home district.

*References to Head Start, throughout, are inclusive of Early Head Start services and programs.