

# Catholics Encountering Congress:

## Living the Gospel at the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering



### *Our Tradition Calls Us into Public Life*

*“In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. This obligation is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do.”*

*-Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, No 13.*

As Catholics, we are called to be deeply engaged in the work of our communities. This includes advocating alongside and on behalf of those who are most vulnerable in our society. When we participate in the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, or other means of lobbying our elected leaders, we bring the gift of the Catholic faith to the public square. This is one way we live out our faith, and our voices have made a difference. In the past, we’ve asked Congress to extend unemployment insurance and by the end of the week, it was included in a final spending package. We’ve asked Congress to release Palestinian humanitarian aid and shortly after the Gathering, Congress began releasing the aid.

### *Congressional Contacts Matter!*

**An essential part of being an effective advocate is building relationships** with our members of Congress and their staff.

**We share our views from our Catholic perspective**, which deepens our commitment to our issues. Members of Congress are also often people of faith as well, and this can create a moment of connection.

**You play a critical and fundamental role as constituents.** Your local perspective and stories are impactful and powerful because they reflect reality in the member’s state or district.

**Direct interactions from constituents, like visits, are the most effective way to influence a member of Congress**, even more so than individualized letters or emails.

These connections can and should **open up a dialogue**--the member of Congress and their staff get to hear the Church’s views on how public policy impacts poor and vulnerable people. At the same time, they can use you as a sounding board for ideas and ask for information about the state or district and the programs you work on.

**You can establish yourself and your organization as resources** for Congressional offices. Invite them to see your programs in action.

# *Preparing for Your Visit*

Keep in mind, advocacy is better together! Most advocacy visits are done with a mix of people who are new and those who have a lot of advocacy experience. Also, USCCB staff is available to assist if you have questions.

- You will **be part of a delegation** of CSMG participants from your state.
- Your delegation will be **guided by your state captain** who will schedule meetings with your Senators and coordinate efforts to schedule meetings with Representatives.
- **The meetings will take place on the last day of CSMG.** You should be prepared to dedicate time away from other distractions during your meetings.

## *Get to Know Your Congressional Members*

### **1. Through Their Websites:**

Visit USCCB's [Legislative Action Center](#) to determine your senators and representative. Go to their websites, paying specific attention to:

- Biographies
- Committee Assignments
- Stances on Issues
- Recent Press Releases--tend to highlight the issues most important to them

A few tips:

- Look for opportunities to make a personal connection:
  - Alma Mater
  - Community and Professional Groups
  - Parish/Other House of Worship
  - Hometown
- Don't just focus on what they say--pay attention to what's NOT there.
  - Is the member of Congress largely silent on the issues we'll be advocating?
  - Don't make assumptions about their faith, politics, history, or experiences.
- Follow them! Check out their Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels.

### **2. Through Media:**

Search local media outlets and online for articles and news broadcasts that mention their local initiatives or votes they have taken on issues.

- What projects have they supported?
- Which local issues are most important to them?
- What programs or activities does my organization have that relate to my member's interest?

A few tips:

- Ask yourself: Is there a way I/my organization can support the local work of the senator or representative? Try to determine common ground and mutual interest.
- Meeting a member of Congress can seem daunting. It's okay to be excited, but don't let it scare you. The more prepared you feel, the better the meeting will go.

### **3. Through Legislation They've Supported:**

- Research the legislation they have introduced and cosponsored at the Library of Congress' legislative database: [congress.gov/](http://congress.gov/)
- Read statements they have made in the Congressional Record: [congress.gov/congressional-record](http://congress.gov/congressional-record)

## *Get to Know Your State and District*

- What does your state and Congressional district look like, when viewed through the lens of the issues we care about?
- Compile information about how the issues you are raising impact your local district as well as your diocese and church programs.
- Use these sites as resources
  - State and County poverty data from CCHD: <https://www.povertyusa.org/data>
  - Congressional District from the Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov/mycd/>
  - Many [State Catholic Conference](#) and Diocesan websites have good information about the Catholic community in your state and district.

## *Get to Know the Issues*

- Be sure to review the “Hill Asks” (legislative priorities) resources. These will be sent to you before CSMG and will include talking points, backgrounders (information sheets on the advocacy issues), and a Message to Congress document.
- Join the Advocacy 101 session on Saturday, January 28<sup>th</sup> to become acquainted with *how* to best advocate.
- Join the Legislative Issues Briefing on Monday, January 30<sup>th</sup> to learn *what* you will be advocating for in Congress.
- Don’t miss the State Delegation meeting during lunch on Monday of CSMG to develop a “game plan” with your group.
- Do your best to learn about the issues, but do not become overwhelmed by this task.  
**Remember, you don’t have to be an expert to raise issues with your member, just a constituent with concerns.**
- Practice your remarks. Hone talking points so your delegation is able to present within 10-15 minutes. Rehearsing is critical for a smooth-running meeting.

## *Logistics for a Hill Visit*

- It will take about **10 minutes** to walk to the Senate office buildings (Russell, Dirksen, and Hart). It will take about **20 minutes** to walk to the House office buildings (Cannon, Longworth, and Rayburn) and to walk from the House to the Senate side of Capitol Hill.
- Allow time for security if you are switching between the House and the Senate side.
- Please inquire at the CSMG Registration Desk if you have someone in your group with a disability that requires assistance to travel to Capitol Hill.



## *Following Your Visit*

- Have a short debrief conversation with your delegation at the end of the visit or the end of the day.
- The [Hill Visit Report Form](#) is an important tool for measuring our impact and effectiveness. CSMG partner organizations use these reports to guide our advocacy even after CSMG ends. Fill out **one report per each visit** to a Congressional office. If you have a more substantive discussion with the Member or staff, please share this information or any instructions for follow-up.
- Choose someone from your state delegation to send a thank you email (ask your state captain for a template email to guide you). Be sure to include the leave behind packet.
- Engage the media to get your message out. Your diocesan communications director can help you. Possible media channels to consider are your diocesan website, local/regional Catholic media, social media channels within the diocese, and secular/local media.
- Congressional offices track social media to gauge public opinion. Tweet or blog about what's happening during the Gathering. Include the hashtag **#CSMG23**



*Thank you!  
Your voice matters!*