

# *Catholics Encountering Congress*

Living the Gospel  
at the  
Catholic Social Ministry Gathering



Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
[www.catholicsocialministrygathering.org](http://www.catholicsocialministrygathering.org)

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# *Our Tradition Calls Us into Public Life*

As Pope Francis teaches in *Fratelli Tutti*, 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.

**“This entails working for a social and political order whose soul is social charity. Once more, I appeal for a renewed appreciation of politics as “a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good”.**

*-Fratelli Tutti, 180*

When we participate in the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, or other means of lobbying our elected leaders, we are bringing the best of our faith tradition to the public square. Our voices have made a difference, and we live out our faith when we share our views with leaders making important policy decisions.

In the past, we’ve asked Congress to:

- Extend Unemployment Insurance...

by the end of the week, it was included in a final spending package.

- Release Palestinian Humanitarian Aid...

shortly after the Gathering, Congress began releasing the aid.



**Catholic Social  
Ministry Gathering**

# *Congressional Contacts Matter!*

**An essential part of being an effective advocate is building relationships.** By participating in legislative advocacy, we can build and strengthen 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. It's important to share your passion for your issue in the light of our faith tradition.

We elect members of Congress. Responding to constituents is a high priority for members and their staff. While the many organizations of the U.S Church meet regularly with members of Congress and the U.S. administration to communicate its priorities, **you play a critical and fundamental role as constituents** to enhance this work by connecting directly with your elected officials to advance the common good. Your local perspective and stories are impactful and powerful because they reflect reality on the ground and in the member's state or district, not just generic talking points.

## According to the Congressional Management Foundation

“The most influential advocacy strategies for swaying an undecided member of Congress depend on personal communications from constituents.”

Constituents who personally communicate with their members of Congress can be more influential than lobbyists.

*Communicating with Congress, 2011*

**Direct interactions from constituents, like virtual visits, are the most effective way to influence a member of Congress,** even more so than individualized letters or emails. During the pandemic, Congressional offices have received increased communication from voters, so staff plan to devote more time and resources to engaging remotely with constituents through video conferencing or online town hall meetings.

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. Invite them to see your programs in action.

**You can establish yourself and your organization as resources** for Congressional offices through these visits.

**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**

# *Preparing for Your Virtual 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 who is receiving additional information.
- In advocating to our representatives in the House, **all participants are to call their representative's office**. You will be provided with a script to help you. Hopefully, this is something you are already familiar with doing or will continue to do after CSMG. If you haven't already, sign up to receive [action alerts](#).
- **The virtual meetings and phone calls 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?



*CSMG Participants Advocating on Capitol Hill*

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 the statements they have made in the Congressional Record: [congress.gov/congressional-record](http://congress.gov/congressional-record)

### Other Resources

- [Govtrack.us](http://Govtrack.us)
- [ContactingCongress.org](http://ContactingCongress.org)
- [Popvox.com](http://Popvox.com)
- Wikipedia

### Political Media

- The Hill: [thehill.com](http://thehill.com)
- Politico: [politico.com](http://politico.com)
- National Journal: [nationaljournal.com](http://nationaljournal.com)
- Roll Call: [rollcall.com](http://rollcall.com)

# *Preparing for Your Virtual Visit*

## *Get to Know Your State and District*

Questions to ask:

1. What does your state and Congressional district look like, when viewed through the lens of the issues we care about?
2. Compile information about how these issues impact your local district as well as your diocese and church programs.
3. Put this information into a format that you can send easily to your legislator.

**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.

### *Remember...*

- Members of Congress and their staff rely on constituents to inform them about the district. It is absolutely vital that they hear your message.
- We are building *relationships*.
- Congressional offices need and we want to be *resources* on these issues.

# *Preparing for Your Virtual Visit*

## *Get to Know the Issues*

- Be sure to review the “Hill Asks” (legislative priorities) resources. These will be sent to you the week before CSMG and will include talking points, backgrounders (information sheets on the advocacy issues), and a Message to Congress document.
- Watch the [Advocacy Training webinar and the Legislative Issues webinar](#) posted the week before CSMG to become acquainted with the new virtual lobbying format and what you will be advocating for in Congress.
- Don’t miss the Legislative Issues briefing on Monday afternoon of CSMG to summarize the issues, discuss current situations in Congress, and answer any questions.
- Develop a “game plan” with your group. Decide on a succinct agenda and a clear message that your group can agree on for your visit. Decide who will speak about what, and in what order, in advance so that you can advocate as a united front for your issues.
- 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 to be able to present within 10-15 minutes. Rehearsing is critical for a smooth-running virtual meeting.



*CSMG Participants in 2018 with Cardinal DiNardo*



# *During Your Virtual Visit*

## *Virtual Congressional Meeting Tips*

### **Create a Professional Space**

**Virtual doesn't mean casual.** Normally, we meet with our members of Congress in their offices, but in a virtual meeting we are inviting them, or their staff, into our homes! Remember to choose a place that checks the following boxes:

- Consistent, strong, and dedicated internet connection – preferably not a public connection
- Quiet with limited ambient noise
- Clean and simple background
- Private – try to find a space where no one will be walking behind you

### **Dress Appropriately for the Call**

**Remember that you are representing yourself, your community and the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering.** This meeting might be happening in your home, but it is still with a member of the United States Congress. Take the time to dress the part, just like you would if you were visiting an office on Capitol Hill. Feel free to show personality or state pride, but make sure that your clothes demonstrate your dedication and respect for the issues you are discussing.

### **Reduce Distractions**

**Turn off your phone.** The meeting is only half an hour long – at most! You need to be fully invested during the whole meeting. Turn your phone off or leave it in another room.

**Close all un-needed windows and tabs on your computer.** This will help your internet connection and will keep you looking focused on camera. If you look distracted because you are looking at another screen or window – the person you are talking to will notice.

**Don't use the chat function.** The chat function should only be used if there is a technical issue. While GIFs and memes can be fun in casual conversations, they can distract from the issue at hand and reduce the impact of your statement.

*These tips were created by Catholic Relief Services and are shared with permission.*

## **Come Prepared**

**Preparation is even more important in a virtual space.** Though you should always come prepared to a legislative meeting, this is even more important when you aren't physically in the same room with your colleagues. Make sure everyone knows each person's role and the order in which everyone is speaking. Write down the order of speaking and indicate back-up speakers in case someone experiences a technical issue when it's his or her turn to speak. It's even helpful to write down the order in which people will introduce themselves.

## **Be Flexible**

**They are learning, too.** The members of Congress and their staff have had to completely change the way they meet with constituents and it doesn't always go smoothly. Don't dwell on potential issues or mistakes but give space for those human moments to connect on a shared experience – like their cat walking through the video or a child making a cameo. While we hope congressional staff will use their camera during the meeting, some may choose not to, and some offices may have a policy not to use zoom (and will instead call in to the meeting). Don't worry – they are still listening to you. It is still helpful to have your camera on so your delegation can see you and feel connected.

*These tips were created by Catholic Relief Services and are shared with permission.*

# *During Your Virtual Visit*

## *Conducting the Meeting*

*Here are a few ideas to help your meeting go smoothly.*

- Remember to introduce yourself and your group and thank them for the chance to meet.
- Mention the Catholic presence in your state, describe your role in the community and how you can help the member understand the local impact of legislation.
- Give an overview of the issues you will discuss and background information you may have.
- Be positive and friendly, but confident and calm. Remember--they are there to serve you.
- Know your agenda and stay on message. Keep your message simple and to the point.
- Explain how these issues affect you. Provide human interest stories to illustrate.
- Try to get a response regarding the member's position on the issues. If they are supportive, ask the member to take some concrete action: cosponsor specific legislation, send a letter to the appropriate committee, sign or start a "Dear Colleague" letter indicating support.
- If a member or staff disagree with you, do not argue. Respond positively, respecting his/her position and offer to supply information as to why you hold your position.
- Take notes during the visit. Ask for the names and emails of staff assigned to work on your issues.
- Be prepared to send the member's office names and contact information for you and your group.
- If you are asked a question and do not know how to respond, say that someone from USCCB will follow-up for you and make sure that you alert USCCB staff.
- Don't assume the member is familiar with the details of the issue/bill, or Catholic teaching.
- Get a quote from your elected official to add to your press release.



# *Following Your Virtual Visit*

## *Help Us by Giving Feedback*

The [Hill Visits Report Form](#) is an important tool for measuring our impact and effectiveness. CSMG partner organizations like USCCB, CRS, CCUSA, and others use these reports to guide our advocacy even after CSMG ends. Although there's only **one** report for each visit made to a Congressional office, all who participated in the visit should chime in with their impressions of the discussion. If possible, have a short debrief conversation with your delegation at the end of the visit or the end of the day.

If you have a more substantive discussion with the Member or staff, please share this information or any instructions for follow-up.

For example:

- Did the member or staffer express any strong opinions about the issues?
- Did they mention any bills or legislation they have sponsored related to the issues?
- Did they say what issues will absorb most of their attention and energy?
- What questions did they ask?
- What other information does the member or staffer want?

*The Report Form is for the **Senate Virtual Visit only**. After the Gathering, we'll send out a CSMG evaluation for the entire gathering.*

## *Keep in Touch*

Your state delegation will choose someone from your group to send a thank you email\* to:

- Share the leave behind packet
- Reinforce your message and the local impact of the issue
- Highlight the main points of the virtual meeting
- Conclude with a personal story that surfaced during the meeting
- If the member requested any additional information during the meeting, include it in your note or indicate that USCCB will follow up.
- If you met with staff, still address the note to the legislator with a copy to the staff member as well as other members of your group.
- Contact your elected official's district office to follow up on issues. You can invite your elected official on a site visit to experience your organization.

\*a template email will be provided to guide you

# *Following Your Virtual Visit*

## *Get Noticed!*

Engaging the media is a great way to get your message out. Discuss how to engage traditional and social media channels with your diocesan communications director. They can also help you with placing your story.

- When contacting the media, pay attention to how you present your story in order to catch their attention.
- Identify what is unique about your story and tie this statement to the local experience about domestic and international poverty.
- Possible media channels to consider: diocesan website, local/regional Catholic media, social media channels within the diocese, secular/local media.
- Remember to add his or her quote from your meeting to the press release.

**A number of Congressional offices track social media to gauge public opinion.**

- Tweet or blog about what's happening during the Gathering.
- Use local/regional social media channels that may attract your legislator's attention. Include the hashtag **#csmg21**

*Thank you!*

*Your voice matters!*

