



Hosting a Successful Congressional Visit

**A How-To Toolkit from
The National Rural Health Association
August 2018**

Inviting Your Member of Congress to Visit

As the Congressional August Recess approaches, Members of Congress and their staff will begin to plan visits across their states and districts. More formally referred to as a “District Work Period,” the Recess is a key opportunity to connect with Members, build relationships with them and their staff, and showcase the incredible work that you, your organization or facility, and your co-workers are doing in your community. A key piece of advocacy is education. Without knowledge of the challenges and opportunities facing rural health providers, Members of Congress cannot understand how critical rural health is to the fabric of rural communities. This is our opportunity to show your Representative and Senator why they must support policies that help rural America.

In preparation, NRHA’s Government Affairs Team has prepared a “How-To” Toolkit to help invite your Senators and Representative to visit you and see your work. Please note that the Senate has (for now) cancelled the August Recess, so it may be more difficult for them to be home in their states; however, this toolkit can be used during any recess period throughout the year.

What is a Congressional Visit?

So what should a Congressional Visit to your facility entail? You want to ensure the visit shows off the incredible and important work that you do in your community. It should include a tour of your facility, including everything that makes your specific services unique. How do you serve your community? How do you provide care that your community cannot live without? Do you use the 340B program in an innovative way? How far away is the next provider? What would transport times look like if your facility was not in existence? These are all the kinds of questions that you can think of to showcase how integral a role you and the other providers you work with play in your community.

A sample visit might be a simple 20-30 minute tour and conversation, or you may instead choose to give a 15 minute tour and then have a 15-20 minute roundtable with your staff where they explain the challenges you face in providing community care. If you have questions or concerns about the schedule for the visit itself, feel free to chat with Jessica Seigel at NRHA. Reach out to Jessica at jseigel@nrharural.org. We are here to help make this process easy and seamless. This should never be a burden to you, but rather an educational opportunity!

A Congressional visit is not just about educating the Member of Congress, but about building relationships with the Member, and equally as important, their staff. Congressional Staff are enormously influential, and building strong relationships with them is so important when it comes to making change happen. In the case that the Member of Congress cannot join you for a visit, do not be upset. Meeting with staff is equally as important.

Documents Included in this Packet

Included in this packet are a how-to guide and all of the relevant documents that you will need to invite your Member of Congress to visit your facility. Each document includes a written letter that you can use, and all you need to do is plug in the information specific to you.

Many of these documents are related to press outreach. We understand that it is a joint decision between your facility and the member and their staff whether the media should be involved. If your facility would like to invite the media, discuss this with the scheduler. Please do not invite media without their consent. If media coverage is agreeable, please use our team as a resource.

If you choose not to involve the media, please try and send a few pictures and a quote from you and/or the Member of Congress regarding the visit to NRHA Government Affairs Communications Coordinator Jessica Seigel at jseigel@nrharural.org. Jessica will tweet out your pictures and send them to the Congressional Staff here in Washington, D.C. If you have any questions regarding this specifically, or any other pieces of this packet, please do not hesitate to reach out to Jessica.

Scheduling Your Visit

To begin the process of inviting your Member of Congress to visit your facility, you will reach out to the District Scheduler with a letter, as included on the next page of this packet. All materials that you will need for scheduling your Congressional visit are included in this packet—all you have to do is plug in the information specific to your organization.

Where to Start

Every Member of Congress has multiple offices—one in Washington, D.C., and District Offices throughout the state or region. When scheduling a visit in the Member's district, you will want to reach out to the District Office. Call the office closest to your facility and ask for the name and email of the person who does the district scheduling.

The call might sound like this: “Hello, this is (name and organization) calling. I'd like to send an invitation to the Congressman/Congresswoman/Senator to visit our facility. What is the name and email of scheduler?”

Then send the email, and possibly a paper letter (the form is included in this packet) to the scheduler inviting the Member to visit. Approximately a week after you have submitted your scheduling request by email/mail, you should call the scheduler to follow up if you have not heard anything back. Your goal is to get a yes or no answer on your scheduling request.

When you call, say: “Hello, this is (name and organization) calling. I'd like to speak with the scheduler (name) to follow up on a scheduling request I submitted last week, please.”

If the Scheduler is unavailable: “The scheduling request is related to (this organization) and we would really love to have the Representative/Senator join us. If you could have the scheduler call me at (phone number) soon, I would really appreciate it.”

Speaking to the Scheduler

Once you are able to connect with the scheduler on the phone, in the case that they have yet to email you back with a reply: “Hello, this is (name and organization) calling. I submitted a scheduling request last week for (this event on this date). I was wondering if you had any information on whether the Representative/Senator would be able to attend.

If the scheduler says they have not made a decision on the scheduling request yet:

“I understand that the Representative/Senator receives so many requests, but we certainly hope this will be one that your office can accommodate. We are very much looking forward to having the Representative/Senator tour/visit our facility and learn about the work we do for the community. We are more than happy to discuss alternative dates if the time and day we provided will not work.

If the scheduler says the Member of Congress is unable to attend: “We're very sorry to hear that the Representative/Senator is unavailable. Is there an alternate time or date that we might be able to make work?”

If the scheduler says yes: “That is wonderful news. We so appreciate the Representative/Senator's willingness to join us at our facility/organization. Thank you so much for your help in scheduling this, and I look forward to meeting you both soon!”

Ask the scheduler to confirm the key details, including the date and time, length of event, and the plans for the visit.

Ask the scheduler how far in advance of the event/meeting you should check in to ensure that nothing on the schedule has changed or if there will be any additional contacts that you will need to be aware of the day of the visit. In some cases, a staff member other than the scheduler will be joining the Member of Congress instead of the scheduler.

Ensure that they have all of your contact information, including your cell phone number. Don't be surprised if they are running late and need to call you the day of the visit.

Sample Invitation Letter

Date

The Honorable [FULL NAME]
United States Senate or House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510 (SENATE) or 20515 (HOUSE)

Dear Senator/Representative [LAST NAME]:

On behalf of [INSERT NAME OF PROGRAM] in [INSERT CITY/TOWN] I would like to invite you to come tour our program during the upcoming recess.

We would like to share with you the services our program has provided our community for the last [INSERT NUMBER] years. During your visit we welcome you to (tour the facility, meet our staff, talk to patients, sit in on one of our meetings, see how our team operates, etc.) Health care in rural America is critical to the communities overall well-being. Rural hospitals and facilities can comprise as much as 20% of the rural economy, and we look forward to the opportunity to show you the role our work plays in the growth and future of our community here in [INSERT CITY/TOWN].

(Insert short paragraph about the facility—what you do, job numbers, economic footprint, patients cared for, explain your role in providing care.)

We are happy to work with your scheduler to find a date that works well for you. I will follow up on this scheduling request within a week.

All of us at [INSERT NAME OF PROGRAM] look forward to offering a more personal look at the challenges and opportunities of providing health care in rural America here in our community.

Sincerely,

Your Name
Title
Organization Name
Organization Address

Getting Contact Information

You can easily find the phone numbers for your Members of Congress on their websites. There should be phone numbers for all of their offices, both in D.C. and in the state.

Are you unsure who the Representative is for you or your facility? You can find out easily at:
<https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>

You can also reach out to the Health Legislative Assistant who you met with in February at the Policy Institute. Even though they're here in D.C., they may be back in the District during the Recess, or they may be able to point you in the right direction.

Preparing for Your Visit

Now it's time to talk about the visit itself, and how to best utilize this opportunity for your advocacy and education efforts. *The Government Affairs Team at NRHA is here to help.*

Contact NRHA

Email Jessica Seigel, NRHA's Government Affairs Communications Coordinator with the confirmation of your visit. She can be easily reached at jseigel@nrharural.org. Please send the email of the person who you are coordinating with, the details/subject of your visit, and the date and time of the visit.

Coordinate with Communications Staff

Please know that it is the decision of the Member and their Staff whether or not the media should be involved, just as it is yours. If media coverage is agreeable, you will want to produce a suite of media materials well in advance of the visit as it can often take days for a member's office to approve those materials. These materials will be sent to local news outlets, and can also be used in requesting that those local newspapers send a reporter the day of the visit. Identify those individuals at your local news outlet that you may want to reach out to and send all relevant materials to them. If you so choose, be sure to draft a media advisory, press release, and photo release... as well as a Tweet! If you need assistance crafting any of these materials, Jessica Seigel at NRHA is here to help.

- **Media Advisory:** A brief written notice to media about an upcoming event or announcement. The advisory does not need to include much, just the date, time, location, purpose of the visit, participants, and relevant contact information. This does not need to even be a full page in length, and can easily be sent to your local newspaper about five days before the visit.
- **Press Release:** This is a written communication announcing the news that is sent to your local media. This usually contains your point of contact at the facility as well as quotes from those at the visit, whether that's your staff, you, or the Member. The release should be sent out on your letterhead and should be approved by the Member's office prior to distribution. It will foster a better relationship with the office if they approve of and are happy with the materials you send out. The release can be drafted before the visit and approved before the visit. That way, it can easily be sent out later that day. The photo release is similar, but obviously cannot be approved until the day of. The photo is as simple as a picture and a caption...speaking of which:
- **Tweet!:** If you don't already have a Twitter for you or your organization, now is the time! Jessica Seigel will hold another "Twitter How-To" Webinar prior to the August Recess to help answer all of your questions. All you need are 180 characters and a picture. Make sure you tag your Member of Congress in the Tweet, and if your Member tweets separately, make sure you re-tweet it too! If that sentence doesn't make sense, then definitely join the webinar! Also be sure to email your tweet to Jessica at jseigel@nrharural.org, or tag [@NRHA_Advocacy](https://twitter.com/NRHA_Advocacy) in your tweet.

While these tasks may seem daunting, writing a quick one page about the incredible work you do is really an easy opportunity to share your story. If you have never written a press release, media advisory, or Tweet before, reach out to Jessica and the NRHA Government Affairs Team. We tell your stories here in Washington, D.C. everyday, and are happy to help you learn how to effectively explain the critical care you provide to your community and the unique challenges that providers in rural areas face.

Is your press release in a local newspaper? Make sure to send it to Jessica at jseigel@nrharural.org so that she can tweet and share it on [@NRHA_Advocacy](https://twitter.com/NRHA_Advocacy).



Sample Media Advisory

Media Advisory

Email Subject Line: Representative/Senator to Tour (Facility Name) - (Date) (Time)

What: Congressman/Congresswoman/Senator will visit (facility name) next (day), (date) at (time). The (hour, half hour, etc.) visit will include a tour of the facility and a reception with employees and rural health community leaders involved in the work here at (facility name) . Media and photographers are welcome to attend.

(Insert paragraph about the facility—what you do, job numbers, economic footprint, patients cared for, explain your role in providing care)

The Congressman/Congresswoman/Senator is working to raise awareness on the issue of rural health in Washington, D.C. and we look forward to the opportunity to educate them on this issue. This will visit will serve as an opportunity to showcase the power of rural providers and patients and the critical role that (insert facility name) plays in the rural health safety net.

When: (date, time, location, including address)

Who: Member of Congress
Relevant Hospital/Facility/Provider attending

Contact: Your name here! Include email and phone

Preparing for Your Visit

In addition to preparing press materials for your visit, you will also want to notify your staff and employees about the visit. Employees, faculty, and staff should be informed of the visit and be made aware of any roles they may be playing in showing off your work. The more prepared everyone is, the better the visit will be. You may also want to send an email a week in advance of the visit, as well as an email the day before the visit, to remind everyone.

While your facility may not be very large, performing a walk-through with those who will be participating in the visit may be helpful to ensure that everything goes smoothly.

You may also want to be sure that you have answers to questions the Member of Congress and their staff may have about simple scheduling tasks (logistics, timing, marketing materials, directions, and parking) and more substantive questions about the work that you do!

Additionally, if you have any materials you provide to visitors, a one-pager on your work, make sure you have a few copies on hand. If you would like assistance in putting together a one pager, email Jessica Seigel at jseigel@nrharural.org. We have included our NRHA Who We Are One Pager which may be helpful.

After Your Visit

First, let us thank you for your work on this visit. This is a huge and very important step in better educating members on the issues facing rural providers and patients. As we work here in D.C. to ensure access to care, stop provider shortages, address substance abuse, and ensure a healthy future for rural America, we need you and your voice. We cannot effectively advocate on your behalf without your active participation.

Thank You and Follow-Up

A thank you from you and your organization should be sent shortly after the member's visit. To ensure delivery, it is best for this letter to be sent via email to the staffer who attended the visit with the member. A sample letter is included in this packet!

Send a thank you email to the staffer as well. They will appreciate this, and it will make fostering and improving this relationship for future visits and advocacy efforts even easier! Invite the member for a return visit, and let them know that you are happy to be a resource to them in the future!

After the tour is complete, let Jessica at NRHA know, and continue to reach out to her with any relevant press materials or links in the following days.

Sample Thank You Letter

Date

The Honorable [FULL NAME]
United States Senate or House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510 (SENATE) or 20515 (HOUSE)

Dear Senator/Representative [LAST NAME]:

On behalf of [INSERT NAME OF PROGRAM] in [INSERT CITY/TOWN] I would like to thank you for taking valuable time from your schedule to visit our (insert facility).

It was an honor and pleasure to meet with you and your staff, and I hope you enjoyed the tour. More importantly, I hope you came away with a greater understanding of (rural health, our work, etc.)

We look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure the healthy future of our rural communities. Please use us as a resource as you tackle issues related to rural health care and access to care. We look forward to working with you and your staff in the coming months. Thank you again for taking this time, and we look forward to speaking with you again soon.

Warmest Regards,

Your Name
Title
Organization Name

Your voice. Louder.

NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION



Who we are

The National Rural Health Association is a national nonprofit and nonpartisan membership organization with more than 21,000 members. NRHA membership consists of a diverse collection of individuals and organizations, all of whom share the common bond of an interest in rural health. The delivery of health care in rural America is drastically changing. NRHA strives to improve the health of the 60 million who call rural America home.

2018 NRHA

Rural Health Champions

Legislative Award

Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV)
Senator John McCain (R-AZ)
Senator Susan Collins (R-ME)
Representative Lynn Jenkins (R-KS-2)
Representative Cheri Bustos (D-IL-17)
Representative Terri Sewell (D-AL-7)

Legislative Staff Award

Steffanie Bezruki
- office of Rep. Cheri Bustos (D-IL)
Beth Wikler
- office of Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN)
Taylor Hittle
- office of Rep. Markwayne Mullin (R-OK)

Our mission:

To provide leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education and research.

What we fight for

NRHA fights for access to care.

Rural populations are per capita older, poorer and sicker than their urban counterparts. Yet, medical deserts are appearing across rural America leaving many of the most vulnerable populations without timely access to care. Continued cuts have severely hurt rural providers, creating job loss and negative changes in service availability.

NRHA fights for a robust rural workforce.

Rural areas have far fewer health care providers and face dramatic challenges in recruiting and retaining a health care workforce. 77% of rural counties in the United States are Primary Care Health Professional Shortage Areas while 9% have no physicians at all. The uneven distribution of health care providers between rural and urban areas represents an inequality regarding access of care and has an impact on the health of the populations.

NRHA fights to support strong funding for the rural health safety net.

The federal investment in rural health programs is a small portion of federal health care spending, but it is critical to rural Americans. These safety net programs increase access to health care providers, improve health outcomes for rural Americans and increase the quality and efficiency of health care delivery in rural America.

Rural Americans – the facts:

Rural residents make up about 20% of the U.S. population but 23% of Medicare beneficiaries. Those 60 million rural Americans are scattered over 95% of the landmass in the U.S.

Rural Americans are older and sicker than their urban counterparts, suffering higher rates of chronic disease such as heart disease and diabetes.

According to a January 2017 Center for Disease Control study, a higher percentage of rural Americans die prematurely.

The opioid crisis is catastrophic in rural America. In fact, the rate of overdose deaths in non-metro counties is 45% higher than in metro counties.

Extreme distances, weather, geography, systemic health care workforce shortages and the hospital closure crisis make access to care the prevailing concern for rural patients.

In an emergency, rural patients must travel twice as far as urban residents to the closest hospital. As a result, 60% of trauma deaths occur in rural America, even though only 20% of Americans live in rural areas.

#RuralHealthDisparities

Health care in rural America is critical to the communities overall wellbeing. It can comprise as much as 20% of the

200,000 jobs were lost annually in rural America during the Great Recession, and 19% of rural Americans, including 25% of

In most rural communities, the hospital is the first or second largest employer, but only if the community still has a hospital. 83 rural hospitals have closed since 2010, and 674 (1/3 of all rural hospitals) are vulnerable to closure.

44% of rural hospitals operate at a loss and 30% operate below a -3% margin. Rural hospitals have absorbed a combined \$318 million in cuts under sequestration, resulting in a loss of 7, 129 community health care jobs and a \$769 million loss to GDP.

If all 674 vulnerable hospitals close, we will lose 99,000 direct health care jobs and 137,000 community jobs, and \$277 billion in GDP. Per-capita annual rural incomes will decrease by \$703.

#RebuildRural #SaveRural