

Meeting your Congressional Representatives

As part of “A Place to Call Home,” you may want to meet with your congressional representative.

Why?

- To present the work of Family Promise/IHN
- To demonstrate the need for more affordable housing
- To ask for co-sponsorship of H.Res. 582, A Child’s Right to Housing Resolution

Meeting with a federal legislator should not be intimidating and ought to be easy to arrange. If your affiliate includes more than one congressional district, choose the representative most likely to support your cause for a first meeting. If you decide to schedule a meeting, be sure to contact Frank McCann at the Family Promise National Office (908-273-1100 x 14 or fmccann@familypromise.org.) He will provide the support and materials you will need.

Preparing for a meeting

The first step is to coordinate with the Affiliate Director a few persons willing and able to make such a visit which often happen during normal business hours. The number of persons can be flexible, but 5-6 works well. You may want to start with a few more. When the actual meeting is scheduled a conflict may exist for some. In this Campaign, it is important to include at least one guest or former guest of the affiliate who can tell their story and put a human face on homelessness. Together, the group should review the material in the Place to Call Home Campaign Handbook, especially concerning H.Res. 582, The Child’s Right to Housing Resolution. Asking the congressperson to co-sponsor this resolution will be the primary mission (“ask”) of the visit.

While not required, an affiliate wide invitation to a public meeting before visiting your representative will serve several useful purposes. First, it will give you a chance to give your message a “trial run.” A meeting also presents the opportunity to gather support for your visit by asking each attendee to write a short, personal, hand-written letter to the rep which you can bring to the local office when you meet. If you need a few more people to join you in the visit, volunteers from the larger meeting may be the answer. To run a successful meeting, use the same agenda items listed below, substituting time to write letters for the “Ask” you will make of the congressperson.

The next step is to schedule a meeting. Call the legislator’s office and ask for the name of the scheduler. They usually want a meeting request in writing. It is best to FAX the request indicating who you want to meet with (the congressperson), the subject matter (homelessness and affordable housing) and about how many people would be attending. Follow-up the FAX with a phone call. You may need to make the call or send the FAX several times until an appointment is scheduled.

Be polite, patient and persistent.

Conducting the Visit

An effective meeting needs a clear agenda and understanding of each participant's role in the meeting. It is best to assign roles (agenda items) that are comfortable for each participant. Wisdom recommends gathering near the congressional office at least ½ hour before the meeting time. You will want to verify attendance, "breathe deeply," review each one's part and rehearse if there is time.

Bring a camera to take a picture with the Representative. Someone on the staff should be available to take the picture. Pictures are helpful for follow-up stories on websites, in newspapers or on blogs.

Be on time to the office and be willing to wait if necessary. Plan to meet for 15-20 minutes which is most likely, but be prepared in case you are given more time. Usually, there is not a lot of time for small talk. Introduce yourselves, and get on with the agenda.

A recommended agenda would include:

- Introductions of each person attending. Be sure to emphasize you are constituents.
- Prayer (optional)
- Introduction of Family Promise/IHN--its mission and service to the community
- The crisis in affordable housing as a systemic cause of homelessness
- A testimony to the realities of homelessness (best if by guest or former guest)
- Presentation of the three legislative issues with a concentration on H.Res. 582
- "Ask" for co-sponsorship of H.Res. 582
- Express gratitude for the meeting, present the "leave behind" packet (supplied by Family Promise National) and agree on next steps/contact.

After the meeting, briefly meet (perhaps in the hallway or for coffee after) to discuss what went well and what could have been improved. Agree on the highlights that can be used in a press release or news story. Decide who will write a formal note of thanks from the group and what it will say.

Send a report about the meeting to Frank at the Family Promise National Office (fmccann@familypromise.org), or call 908-273-1100 x 14. We will be tracking the progress of visits across the country.

If you have the capability, issue a Press Release on the meeting indicating if the representative is willing to support H.Res. 582, or when s/he said you could expect a decision. Submit a picture with the press release. If you cannot issue the release, contact Frank at National for help.

Arranging and carrying out such a meeting may be a new experience for many. These representatives work for you. We have both a duty and responsibility to share with them the hardships guest families face and solutions we believe can resolve the crisis. For many who participate, such a visit can strengthen or restore confidence in our representative form of government.