



**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE
RETIREMENT ADMINISTRATORS**

Helpful Hints for Congressional Visits

NASRA Administrators' Meeting

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE RETIREMENT ADMINISTRATORS

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The Value of Establishing Ties with Your Congressional Delegation and their Staff

NASRA members are strongly encouraged to foster relationships with members of their congressional delegation and key staff in their Washington, DC offices. This is one of the principal reasons NASRA holds a winter administrators' meeting in the nation's capital each year. Establishing ties with your delegation will be critical, particularly as a new Administration and Congress tackle a number of significant policy issues early in the year addressing troubled industries, financial market reforms, economic stimulus and State and local government assistance.

Policymakers, thought leaders and the media remain concerned with how public pensions will weather this economic downturn. Yet another Government Accountability Office (GAO) report is in the works, this time focusing on public pension investment policies and asset allocation, with an eye toward determining whether plans are or were "chasing returns."

Unfortunately, inaccurate and misleading information about public employee pensions read in the press or obtained from "opponents" will not only be perceived as accurate and credible, but applicable to the entire industry. Thus, it is critical that NASRA members set the record straight by relaying clear, accurate information regarding their system to their members of Congress. In particular, those who serve on key committees or in the leadership need to be assured that their state is "getting it right" when it comes to retirement security.

Establishing ongoing contact with your delegation and their key staff will greatly increase their understanding of your plan and enhance your ability to positively affect helpful or harmful federal policies. **If you do not have time to schedule a meeting with every office, dropping off summary information about your plan and public plans in general, along with your business card can be extremely advantageous –then make a follow-up call when you are back home to ensure they received the information and answer any questions.**

Many of you are experienced at effective congressional relations. For those who are not, or for those of you that have indicated you would appreciate having a checklist to prepare for Capitol Hill meetings, the following are some suggestions that may be helpful:

✓ **Visit Members in Their District, and their Washington-DC Based Staff While in the Nation’s Capital**

The Importance of Visiting Members in their District.

The best time to meet with members of your delegation is often when they are home during a District Work Period. This is usually when members are most receptive to hearing from their constituencies and less distracted by the “business of the nation.” This is also a good time to thank them for help on past legislation or regulations, update them on the status of your plan, and answer any questions they may have. You could also arrange a photo opportunity to go in your membership newsletter.

Cultivating a Relationship with Washington DC-Based Staff

While there are many opportunities to visit with members of Congress in their district, your time in Washington, DC allows you to meet directly with the legislative staff who make policy recommendations and who wield a great deal of influence with their bosses. Washington staff often does not get out to the district offices. Thus, meeting with staff in Washington, DC is extremely important. The NASRA winter directors’ meeting is a helpful time to meet as it kicks off a new Congressional session.

Visiting Key Members of Your Delegation Later in the Year with NASRA and other Association Staff

If you cannot visit some or all of the key members of your delegation during the NASRA Winter Directors’ Meeting, NASRA staff can work with you or your government relations staff later in the year to schedule meetings and accompany you to meet with them. This is a highly effective way to educate your delegation, as it allows them to get the benefit of both the local and national perspectives.

✓ Prepare a One-Pager or Primer

Personal meetings with Congressional members and staff can be extremely effective in educating them about your pension system and its importance to their state AND THEIR CONSTITUENTS. Be prepared for the Washington-based staff to know little about state government operations, as many members and their staff do not necessarily come from state or local government. Additionally, staff may know even less about the state pension system or pensions in general.

It is advisable to provide members and staff with a “leave behind” packet of information on public pensions, including a brief primer or one-page handout on the basics of your plan. Plan primers that break out information by county or district can be extremely valuable to a member. Compiling this information will better prepare you for your meeting and allow you to highlight key information for the legislator and their staff, including:

- The number of participants, retirees and beneficiaries covered by your system (illustrate how many of their constituents you represent);
- The amount of distributions paid to beneficiaries (demonstrating the direct value to the local economy and revenues);
- The portion of benefits attributable to investment income and employee contributions (try to dispel any misconceptions that this is a transfer from taxpayers to public retirees—advance-funding, by design, allows there to be more coming out than going in);
- A member snapshot (classes of employees covered, average salary; average benefit, average years in retirement, percent that stay in-state after retirement; etc.);
- The system’s asset allocation (i.e. invested professionally and prudently, to weather market fluctuations);
- The types of benefits offered through the plan (disability, life, health, deferred comp, etc.) that convey if it is more than just a pension plan;
- The governance structure of the plan (illustrating the comprehensive and open regulation of these retirement plans and strong protections for their participants and assets).

NASRA and NCTR staff have prepared a packet of materials on how public sector plans as a whole are “getting it right” when it comes to retirement security. Space will be provided for you to add information specific to your system.

✓ Read Biographies of Your Delegation

Read the biographical sketch in the Congressional directory or on the member's web site (all members' pages are listed on www.house.gov or www.senate.gov) to better understand the member's priorities, on what committee and subcommittees they serve, as well as their seniority on those committees. It also is helpful to read recent local and national news articles about the members to learn the range of issues they are facing.

✓ Learn Committee Assignments

NASRA has posted on its federal page a list of the key members of Congress in each state (<http://www.nasra.org/federal/federal.htm>). While thousands of pieces of federal legislation are introduced each session, all serious consideration of bills is conducted through committees. Members tend to concentrate on issues covered by the committees on which they serve and rely on colleagues or well-informed constituents (like you) or lobbyists (like association staff or firms representing pension plans) for other issues.

The committees with jurisdiction over public pension plans are the **House Ways and Means** and **Senate Finance Committees**. A more focused discussion on the nuances of your state system and public plans is critical for members of your delegation who sit on those committees.

Members sitting on the **House Education and the Workforce Committee** or the **Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee** have jurisdiction over ERISA and may have a better understanding of pension issues, but may need more knowledge regarding the governance of non-ERISA plans.

Expect members serving on the **House Financial Services Committee** or the **Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs** to have an interest in system investments, particularly this year as financial market reforms are expected.

Members of your delegation who are not on these committees still need to learn of issues that impact your system, but may require a more fundamental education on the topics.

✓ **Establish a Personal Connection**

Ask the staff if they are from your state, where they attended college, if they have family members who have worked for the state or are a teacher, etc. It also is extremely important to learn (and relay to staff) if the member of Congress was a participant in your plan and is/will be a beneficiary.

Many Members of Congress have had State or local public service. According to the Congressional Research Service, the 111th Congress includes 16 former public safety officers, 38 former mayors, 13 former state governors, 10 former lieutenant governors and 269 former state legislators (for a list of members see <http://www.ncsl.org/print/statefed/fsl111.pdf>).

✓ **Offer to be a Resource**

It often is useful for members and staff to have a contact in the home state that understands complex issues, particularly retirement and investment policies. Leave your business card and let staff know that they can call on you with any questions.

Also, refer them to NASRA's Washington Office or other national pension organizations for information. This will help them understand that many organizations share your views and that public pension issues are important in every state and supported by many key national organizations such as the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties, the Fraternal Order of Police, the International Association of Fire Fighters, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, AFSCME, and over twenty others. These important national organizations work together on key policy issues affecting public pensions.

✓ **Communicate Critical Information in Your Meeting**

The following tips were developed by communications experts to assist with relaying the most critical information to members of Congress and staff, who are rarely experts on our issues, and often pressed for time:

- **Develop Your Key Messages.** In an information-overload society, making a lasting impression is more difficult than ever. Prior to the meeting, develop the top three key points or “messages” that the legislator/staffer should understand and remember after your meeting. Messages that resonate are clear, concise, and compelling. Throughout the course of the meeting, subtly repeat the messages at least 3 times to ensure your point is made. It also helpful to ensure any background information you leave behind contains your key messages
- **Provide Facts, Data, Anecdotes and Analogies – And Make It Local.** You will be more memorable, understandable and credible if your messages are supported by data and create a visual image in the mind’s eye. For example, provide a chart of the economic impact of your pension fund in that legislative district or independent report regarding your system. You also can provide a real life example of a local police officer’s or teacher’s salary, contribution to the pension system and modest retirement benefit.
- **Prepare a 2-Minute and 20-Minute Presentation.** You may have a 20 minute meeting scheduled, but the Member is called for a floor vote. Or a five-minute meeting will run longer if you have piqued their interest. Always be prepared with your “elevator” pitch as well as the longer presentation.
- **Ask Questions.** Don’t be reluctant to politely ask about their concerns, knowledge base, position, or thoughts. The more you know your audience, the better you can address any issues or strengthen your relationship.
- **Be Prepared for the Tough Questions.** Carefully think through in advance the most difficult questions you may be asked – and prepare your responses. If you receive an unanticipated question and don’t have the answer, it is perfectly acceptable to say you don’t currently have the information, but commit to follow-up with a response.

SCHEDULING TIPS

Below are some helpful steps to assist you and your scheduler in arranging visits with your Congressional delegation. **If you do not have time to schedule a meeting with every office, drop off a primer or packet of information on your plan with your business card. A “pop-in” to introduce yourself to the staff can also be extremely advantageous.**

- Call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 225-3121 and ask to be connected to a specific Congress member's office (direct phone numbers can also be obtained from the Internet at www.house.gov or www.senate.gov).
- If you plan to meet with staff (which is encouraged) and you do not know them by name, ask for the staff person responsible for pension tax issues. (If you plan to meet with the member of Congress directly, ask for his/her scheduler).
- Explain who you are and who you represent (Name, Title, System, number of participants).
- Offer to send advance materials about the retirement system, such as your popular report or pension primer. (*Note: ask for an e-mail address and/or fax number to which materials can be sent, as mail can be significantly delayed*).
- **Capitol Security.** Added security measures and construction may increase the time needed to go between House and Senate office buildings. If you have meetings in the Capitol, you are required to show photo identification and check-in at the front security station. **A map of the Capitol grounds and office locations is attached.**
- **Follow-up.** Take notes following your meeting to keep a log of the staff contacts and their interest in public pension issues. If possible, forward them to the NASRA Washington, DC office so we know who has heard from home and who may be helpful on issues in the future. (An office that has met with and/or has a relationship with their state pension system can be invaluable!)

If you have any questions, would like additional information, or need any assistance, please do not hesitate to call the NASRA Washington Office at 202-624-1417, or email jeannine@nasra.org.

