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# Sharper Federal Advocacy

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*More than any other group of Americans, Native Americans are affected by Federal action. Because of this, it is extremely important that Indian Country advocates have focused and effective strategies when working with the U.S. Congress and Federal departments and agencies. Set forth below is a list of key concepts for successful advocacy that should be considered when planning and assessing your strategy for advancing Native interests before the Federal government.*

- **Successful lobbying is rooted in building strong relationships.** In this regard, lobbying is no different from virtually any other human activity. A strong relationship is built upon credibility, integrity and reliability.
- **Ignorance is the enemy.** Much of the opposition facing Indian Country is based on ignorance. In many cases, once educated on Indian issues, a politician will move towards the pro-Indian position.
- **Be prepared.** It is important to have a thorough understanding of the issues you are discussing so that the Member of Congress or Federal official can truly look to you as a positive resource and a reliable source of information. Being prepared includes tracking relevant legislation, becoming involved in national Indian organizations, establishing a tribal office in Washington or retaining a firm in Washington to create an ongoing Tribal presence as well as advise the Tribe on important developments. Another part of being prepared is having a well thought-out plan or strategy for achieving your goals.
- **Know what you are asking for.** When you enter a Congressional office you should know exactly why you are there and what you want. Be specific in your request. Do not just raise an issue, problem or concern and not have a proposed solution or action to suggest.
- **Keep it simple.** Distill your points to their essence. Remember, everybody is short on time. It is not uncommon for Members of Congress or staff to have 15 or more meetings in a day. Frequently, they are handling as many issues as well. Make it as easy as possible for them.
- **Use real-life human stories.** Abstract arguments are always given greater life when enhanced by real-life human stories that illustrate the points you are making.
- **Know your audience.** To communicate effectively, you must understand your audience as well as possible. For example: Is the Congressman a Republican or a Democrat? To what Committees does he or she belong? What is his or her past voting record on the

issues of concern to you? What are his or her interests? What is the character of their constituency?

- **Have well-written briefing materials.** Your whole presentation should be laid out in clear, easy-to-read language in briefing materials that are truly brief! Congressional offices do not have time to wade through 20-page documents. If they need more information, they will ask for it. In the meantime, keep your documents short.
- **Do the work for the staff.** Congressional offices are overworked. They appreciate any and all assistance. The more work you can do for a Congressional office, the more likely it will be that you will get a quick response. For instance, if you want a Member of Congress to send a letter, bring with you a draft letter for his or her staff to use. If you are asking for legislation, prepare draft language. If staff need more information on an issue, research and get that information to them.
- **Public Relations.** Public relations is the oxygen many politicians breathe. If you have good meetings with a politician, put out a press release saying so. Conversely, if things are not going well, consider whether a critical statement in the media would be advisable.
- **Political Contributions.** Regrettably, if public relations is the oxygen, than political contributions are the life-blood for many politicians. Consider appropriate opportunities to support politicians who support your goals or with whom you want to build a relationship.
- **Build Alliances.** This can be especially advantageous for Indian Country, since generally Tribes do not have large populations. Often alliances can be forged with other Indian tribes and tribal organizations, as well as with religious groups and other political entities that share common interests with you.
- **Schedule Meetings in Advance.** If you schedule in advance, you are usually more likely to meet with the Member of Congress. Even if you end up meeting with staff, which is commonly the case and is not a bad thing as it is the staff that does most of the work, it is preferable to schedule meetings in advance.
- **Lobby at Home.** Do not just meet with your Congressional representatives in Washington. Take the opportunity to meet with them when they are at home. Also, get to know their local staff.
- **Site Visits.** Look for opportunities to arrange site visits for Members of Congress and for their staff. A site visit can create a level of connection not generally possible through meetings in a Capitol Hill office.