

Summer of Advocacy: A Toolkit for Meeting with your Members of Congress Virtually

The National Council for Behavioral Health is calling on legislators to **support an emergency appropriation of \$38.5 billion for providers of mental health and addiction treatment services.** COVID-19 has exacerbated the need for behavioral health services and your organization has been at the front line providing critical care. The best way we can influence legislators is to have them hear directly from you, their constituents, about the critical work your organization is doing and how serious your needs are. Your advocacy efforts are key to our success!

This summer, join the National Council and your colleagues across the country to host virtual meetings with your legislators to tell them that behavioral health organizations need additional funding.

2020 Congressional Calendar

August

Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17 DNC	18 DNC	19 DNC	20 DNC	21	22
23	24 RNC	25 RNC	26 RNC	27 RNC	28	29
30	31					

September

Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7 Labor Day	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18 Rosh Hashana (begins)	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27 Yom Kippur (begins)	28	29	30			

Members of Congress will be back home in their districts during August and September, and even though you won't be able to meet with them in person, they will have more time to participate in virtual meetings with constituents like you. This is your opportunity to share with them how your organization and community are weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, how you have transformed your service array to meet the needs of clients and to urge their continued support of behavioral health providers in future legislation and funding decisions.

Our Ask: “Support an emergency appropriation of \$38.5 billion for providers of mental health and addiction treatment services.”

There are three ways YOU can participate:

1. Host a virtual site visit with your legislator.
2. Schedule a virtual meeting with legislators or staff.
3. Attend a tele-town hall meeting hosted by your legislator.

This toolkit includes:

- ✓ Tips for virtual meetings
- ✓ Templates to request a meeting
- ✓ Talking points for your meeting
- ✓ Template for thank you notes

For more tips for advocacy, review our [Advocacy Handbook](#). For any other questions, contact Natalie Weiner at NatalieW@TheNationalCouncil.org

Thank you for joining us at this critical time for behavioral health providers!

Scheduling a Virtual Meeting

Hosting a site visit or meeting is one of the most impactful methods of educating your legislators about how your organization is serving your community. While COVID-19 will prevent in-person meetings, members of Congress and their staff continue to meet with constituents virtually. Invite your Senators and Representative to visit your site virtually so they can see the great work of your organization. If a site visit is not an option at this time, a regular virtual meeting will still make a huge impact.

A Step-by-Step Checklist for Planning a Virtual Site Visit or Meeting

Three to four weeks out:

1. Invite your legislator by phone or email – either directly or through staff, depending on how well you know the legislator. Be flexible with what time and virtual works best for them. *We've provided a [directory of congressional schedulers](#) and a [sample invitation](#).*
2. Plan an agenda that will give your legislator's office an overview of your activities, successes and financial needs. *We have provided [sample agendas](#) for varying meeting lengths.*
3. Invite attendees to participate in the site visit. This could include staff, consumers, family members and community partners such as schools or law enforcement.

One to two weeks out:

4. Get in touch with your staff contact in the legislator's office to confirm the meeting and the correct virtual platform to use. Send them any briefing materials you have developed for this meeting detailing your organization, the community it serves and the services you offer.
5. Circulate the agenda for the virtual meeting with all participants. Be sure your staff and any consumers or community members who are attending are briefed on their role and messages. *Here are some [sample talking points and key messages](#).*
6. Finally, offer assistance writing a press release to be sent to local media along with photos or, if your legislator prefers, issue one from your organization. *Need help drafting a press release? Let us know!*

Day of:

7. Test the technology. Make sure your videos and microphones are working. Do a test run with the virtual platform with your staff.
8. Be on time and stick to the agenda – but be flexible if the legislator or staff member is running late or if their schedule changes.
9. Ask if the legislator and their staff are willing to be photographed. If so, you can take a screenshot of your virtual meeting for use in the legislator's newsletter, website or social media and make them available to the local press. Post pictures to social media and tag your legislator.

Within one week after:

10. Follow up with a thank you letter to your legislator after their visit. Use this time to memorialize the conversation by providing details about what was discussed, adding additional details and data to your talking points and reiterating your ask of the legislator in writing. *Here is a [sample thank you letter](#).*
11. Let us know how it went! Email Natalie Weiner at NatalieW@TheNationalCouncil.org.

Preparing for a Virtual Meeting

Do Your Research

- Has your organization met with this legislator before? Are they familiar with your work?
- Is this legislator in leadership or on key committees? How have they voted on mental health and substance use legislation in the past? You can check on <https://www.congress.gov/> or [email us](#) to help develop a profile of your legislator.
- Do they have an interest in issues related to health care, veterans' services, schools or law enforcement? Tailor the agenda, talking points and any consumer or community attendees for the site visit to fit the interests of the legislator.

Practice Your Taking Points

- Be clear with your ask. Mention it in the beginning and conclude with it. **“Will you support an emergency appropriation of \$38.5 billion for providers of mental health and addiction treatment services?”**
 - Have details prepared. Did you receive a PPP loan? How much did you receive from the Provider Relief Fund? What has your revenue loss been? Have you experienced lay offs or furloughs? Have you seen an increased need for services as a result of COVID-19?
- Identify the top messages you want to share with your legislator and reinforce them throughout the visit. If you are doing a virtual tour of your facility, show how different aspects of your operations tie into those key messages. See [talking points](#) and [sample agenda](#).
- Consider asking clients and family members to spend a few minutes with the legislator and share their stories. Brief employees who are to be involved in advance about what is expected of them and how they can help you stay on schedule.
 - **Tip:** For virtual meetings, do not have too many people participating. It may be distracting and you do not want introductions to take up too much of the time you have with the legislator. Plan in advance who is going to talk and when.
- Remember that your legislator and staff may not be well-versed in behavioral health care delivery and avoid jargon and acronyms that are not common for people who don't work in behavioral health. Provide a clear overview of your organization and the services you provide in lay terms.
- Keep it local. Share data and stories about how you're treating people in the community and the impact COVID-19 has had on you.

Test the Technology

- Practice using the platform that your legislator's staff wants to use
- Test the lighting, camera and microphone before the visit. Ask other participants to do the same.
- If you are doing the visit virtually from your site, test how it looks and sounds to broadcast from there.
- Conduct a full run-through with any staff or clients before the meeting starts.

Virtual Town Hall Meetings

Many legislators will be hosting virtual or tele-town halls during the August Recess. If you cannot schedule a virtual meeting, attending a town hall will give your organization the opportunity to ask questions of your elected officials and voice your opinions on the issues.

Some legislators are also turning to Twitter to hold Tweet Chats, where anyone can participate in the dialogue by using a common hashtag. You can find out about upcoming meetings or chats by checking the legislator's website, signing up for their newsletters or by following them on social media. To find your Member's Twitter account, check out this [list](#). You can use the same talking points to ask a question during the town hall or Twitter chat.