

PLANNING A SITE VISIT

Getting started

A “site visit” gives a policymaker and/or their staff the opportunity to see your work firsthand by visiting your program where your work— and the benefits it provides—is in full action. Many site visits include a tour and give the policymaker a chance to meet your staff and speak with the children and families who benefit from your program. A “site visit” is a surefire way to engage your policymaker in your work. It allows them to see firsthand the work that you are doing and connects them in an effective way by creating a visual image.

Asking your policymaker to visit your program is one of the most effective ways to familiarize them with your work and show off your successes. It gives you the opportunity to get to know the policymaker better and build your relationship with them. A policymaker who has seen what you’re doing for themselves is more likely to champion your issue in the future. It also provides some great photo opportunities!

You’ll want to do some research about whom to invite and when. Policymakers receive many requests for site visits, but their ability to accept your invitation will depend on many factors, including the policymaker’s busy schedule. The first step is to settle on a few dates or a window of time. It is important to let the policymaker and his or her staff know you can be flexible. As you work to determine a date, you should also develop an agenda for the visit and consider who else you will invite and how they will contribute to a successful visit.

Scheduling a site visit

Due to the demands on members of Congress and Minnesota state legislators, their schedules fill up quickly. Your invitation letter should be sent several weeks in advance of your preferred date for their visit.

The letter should be personalized with specific information about your afterschool program and should include a date or window of time during which you would like them to visit. The letter should be printed on letterhead and signed by the head of the program. The letter should then be emailed to the member’s scheduler or appropriate staff. You should also send an electronic version of your invitation to the scheduler or legislative assistant’s email address, commonly found on the policymaker’s website.

Here are some other helpful things to keep in mind while planning the legislators visit:

- Policymakers like to see your program in action! Invite the member to participate or observe an activity.
- If media coverage is agreeable with the legislator(s) attending, you should plan to produce media materials – such as an event advisory or press release – in advance of the visit. It is also a good idea to share this with the legislator’s office and give them ample time to respond before sending to the media. Ignite Afterschool can assist you with drafting these materials as needed.

- Appoint someone to greet the policymaker upon their arrival and serve as a host for the duration of the visit. Consider having a “Welcome” banner or sign at the door or in another high-visibility location.
- Take a tour of your facility.
- Meet with students and staff.
- Be sure to take photos.
- One hour is a good standard to follow when planning a site visit. This should include a few minutes for greetings and introductions, 20-25 minutes for a tour and observing/participating in activities, 20-30 minutes for meeting with staff and students, and some time reserved at the end for closing remarks and thank yous.

After the visit

- Be sure to send a thank you note to the policymaker for attending.
- Share some photos from the visit on social media and be sure to thank (and tag!) your legislator(s) and any other guests.
- Keep the policymaker’s staff updated on events and the impact you are making within the community.

Key things to remember

- Plan ahead and well in advance.
- Be flexible with dates and times, and don’t be discouraged if your first attempt doesn’t work out. Legislators have busy schedules, and you can try again later.
- Don’t assume legislators know about your program (or afterschool programming in general) or the research and data that backs up our work. Depending on their own histories, experience, or committee assignments, this may be new territory for some lawmakers. Be understanding and focus on educating them using the key messages and your own personal stories.