

GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTIONS WITH POLICY MAKERS

THE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH LABORATORY TOUR

PLANNING THE VISIT

- The purpose of conducting laboratory tours is to establish a relationship with the official so that science and health related policy decisions can be informed by the best available evidence. Such relationships can be used to advocate for sustained use and support of the scientific process and knowledge by funding scientific research through federal agencies including NSF, NIH, DOD, CDC and HRSA.
- Treat this interaction primarily as a chance to meet and get to know someone who is serving in the public's interest, just as you do. Unlike a visit to the local district or Washington, DC office however, the lab tour will frequently serve the policymaker's goal of communicating with a wide swath of concerned constituents.
- Find out as much as you can about the member beforehand in order to help you make the connection. If he/she has already put a marker down in support of a particular research area (e.g. they've cosponsored a bill focused on Parkinson's disease), thank him/her for that indication of their interest in medical research.
- If you have read or heard any comments the policymaker has made that resonated in a positive way with you, mention that to the policymaker; e.g. "I really appreciated what you had to say about..."
- A lab tour will necessarily engage the policymaker's local district office. Discussing a lab tour with the health related staff, either by email or phone contact, will usually be the first step in establishing whether the policymaker is interested in making a visit.
- If there is interest, given that your lab is part of a large complex institution, contact your institution's Press, Public Relations or Communications personnel to engage them. As planned visits by elected officials usually bring great interest on the part of institutional administrators, having a clear agenda with the policymaker's staff before contact can assure that the visit is to your lab and not the wider institution. But such discussions can become challenging!
- The Press or Communications personnel will usually arrange for the entire event on your campus that includes parking, preparation of the venue, security, press coverage and other logistical issues, like cleaning and organizing the space.
- Policymakers make lab visits for a number of reasons that may include having family members with a disease (such as Alzheimer's); learning more about health issues they champion; supporting growth of a sector that votes for them, etc. However, officials usually want to connect to constituents during their visits. The policymaker staff as well as your Press personnel will likely reach out to local disease related advocates and their organizations (e.g., autism, Parkinson's, etc.) as well as local journalists, radio or even TV, so that both the institution and the official gain recognition.
- The policymaker's staff will frequently preview what you plan to communicate, to both apprise you of their positions and interests, as well as make constructive comments!

THE LAB TOUR

- With knowledge of their interest in the issue, create connections by asking questions, asking for advice, giving the policymaker some brief background on you as it relates to the district or state he/she represents.
- Prepare brief and simple presentations whether in words, PowerPoint slides or diagrams. It is critical to explain how what you are doing relates to basic scientific discovery, people's health or the understanding of disease and/or its treatment.
- The visit can be enhanced by including other research collaborators: following your initial introduction to the field and its importance, move to another location where a colleague shows your technology and exemplary data (action potential patterns; neuronal process outgrowth; cell pathology) where the official can easily distinguish group differences. Perhaps wrap up with statements by disease advocates, if relevant.
- Having disease related advocates in attendance if possible reinforces the value of your work to the general voting public.
- Explain how state and federal grants not only support basic or clinical research, but also fund the salaries of investigators and the needed personnel to support laboratories and institutions, as well as provide educational experiences to undergraduates, graduate and postdoctoral fellows who will contribute to future discoveries and cures. Jobs, education, discoveries, health and healthcare!
- Ask what members of the research community could do to be better advocate for research; e.g. "Do you think personal stories or economic data have more of an impact on the Hill?"
- Offer to help get the word out that the member took the time to make the visit; e.g. we'd like to write a blog post about your visit and your leadership in the medical research arena. Take pictures to post on your website and offer to share copies with the member's communications staff.
- Make an ask: e.g. "Would you consider sending a letter to House/Senate leadership stressing the importance of assigning a high priority to (NIH/NSF/medical research) funding in the fiscal year xx appropriations bill?"

AFTER THE VISIT

- Follow up the visit with a thank you note that you attach to an email to the district/state director, or if staff did not attend, to the member's Chief of Staff.
- Keep in touch with local staff periodically offering advice.

For more useful information see also:

[Society for Neuroscience – Advocacy Network](#)
[Research!America – Advocacy and Action](#)