



FEDERAL UPDATE

The Future of Congressional Outreach

BY MEHREEN HAROON

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, you'd have occasional opportunities to engage your member of Congress during one of their visits back home, sometimes even through in-person gatherings and meetings. But now, those opportunities are significantly limited, and engaging in congressional outreach requires alternative mechanisms mixed with a little creativity.

GET STARTED

One thing hasn't changed. The first step is to know who your members of Congress are and who would be the appropriate point of contact for your jurisdiction's needs. Do you want to contact your district's representative, your state's senators, or all the above? This information is available at [congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov). The right-hand side of the homepage will lead you to the directory of members of Congress that includes access to their contact information, such as their phone number, email addresses,

and physical office addresses for both Washington, D.C., and their home districts. Moving into 2021 brings a new session of Congress, so there is a good chance many of you will need to get to know new delegation members.

While the past few months have created myriad complications in moving from conventional contacts to virtual communication, many opportunities have stemmed from this change.

This article explores some ways you can still successfully advocate to Congress and ensure your senators and representative continue to hear from constituents in their home districts.

Keep in mind that the "how" you engage does not change the "why"—federal policymakers are constantly evaluating proposals that can impact your job as a finance officer. Communicating how proposed or enacted legislation affects your ability to ensure thriving local communities will always be important.



SET UP A VIDEO CALL

Establishing virtual communication can be difficult, especially if it's an introductory meeting. Since first impressions are so important, a face-to-face online meeting is better than a simple phone call as far as establishing that human connection. Before the meeting starts, provide ample information about your key priorities through an email or a coordinated call with staff—this allows your senators or representative to prepare. Focus on a specific initiative so they can work out any questions or concerns before the meeting.

As for making a lasting impression during a short meeting, the challenges remain the same online as they are in person. Be enthusiastic about your jurisdiction's projects and priorities and promote a strong positive relationship between your community and your federal partners. Be clear, direct, and informative in your delivery. If you are using a PowerPoint presentation during the meeting, make sure it is easy to understand, data-driven, and visually appealing. It should illustrate the bigger picture about your project and priorities and detail the ways in which the initiative is relevant to your member of Congress by specifying ways in which they can be helpful. Be prepared to provide answers to their questions.

If your government's operations have largely moved online, you might want to use this to help your member of Congress and their staff better understand how your government works, creating further engagement. For example, invite them to join online budget meetings to help them see how local budgeting processes work.



ORGANIZE A VIRTUAL TOUR

You might have invited members of Congress to visit project sites in-person before the pandemic, but for the time being, that isn't a good option. A virtual tour can serve as an excellent alternative, though, and it can be done in a variety of ways.

Live. Showcase the project by doing a walk-through while your senators or representative are watching through your phone, computer, or tablet—which should have high-definition video quality. You'll obviously need to have the project site set up with the necessities, such as strong Internet to ensure the connection doesn't drop.

Pre-recorded. You might want to avoid taking chances with unstable Internet connections or other issues by creating a pre-recorded tour of the project site, which you could present as a video during a live virtual meeting. This option also eases the difficulty of narrating a live tour and dealing with any unplanned interruptions, as you'd have the option of editing the footage.

PowerPoint. Include high-quality pictures of the project in your presentation, which you can use to help explain the initiative during the virtual meeting. The challenge here might be effectively exhibiting the highlights of your jurisdiction's project, so make a real effort to capture the most important points.



HARNESS THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has become the new norm of communication in both the public and private sectors, and your jurisdiction can benefit from strengthening its social media platforms. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and so on are resources for engaging with your senators and representative. You can reach a wider audience and involve your community in building a stronger group and further encouraging your jurisdiction's priorities.

This can raise awareness through the increased public support of your initiatives and provide more traction by enhancing community relationships. Social media is not only an excellent resource to communicate with your congressional representative, but also to expand your network—which could simultaneously catch their attention, as members of Congress are likely to be attracted to initiatives that could make a difference for their communities.

Expanding your network through social media could also mean collaborating with other jurisdictions, sharing similar priorities and building more support for collective goals. This could include sharing useful information and exclusive internal details that could further develop the initiatives of everyone involved. Different perspectives can create new opportunities, which can be achieved through collaborative efforts via social media.



SEND A LETTER

You can always request congressional support on your issues by sending a letter that outlines the key priorities. While this is a fairly traditional route for congressional outreach, don't phone it in—because it's lacking in personal contact, written communication requires strategic execution to be effective. Explain the issue thoroughly, including any materials needed to provide more information, and be clear about what you are asking for assistance with. The fewer questions your member of Congress has after reviewing the details, the stronger your case will be. Think about your project from the perspective of an outsider who doesn't know anything about it and try to address details they should know.



USE GFOA'S ADVOCACY TOOLS

GFOA's Federal Liaison Center is consistently advocating for the needs of state and local governments, based on our policy platform. Our website (gfoa.org/federal-advocacy) provides access to a variety of tools and information you can use to help your jurisdiction in your outreach to your members of Congress, including template letters and talking points you can use to reflect your jurisdiction's priorities and further your efforts. You can help shape the federal legislative agenda through effective communication with your members of Congress. Additionally, you can contact the Federal Liaison Center for further assistance in providing follow-up with member offices in Washington, D.C.



LOOKING AHEAD

We have found ourselves in a new environment where the future of advocacy will need to be reconsidered. Outreach may never be the same as it was before the COVID-19 pandemic, but public finance officials can remain productive by seizing the new opportunities virtual platforms have provided. You can still conduct effective outreach on key priorities and initiatives for your jurisdiction. ■

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Visit gfoa.org/federal-advocacy to access information about reaching out to the appropriate point of contact for your jurisdiction's needs.

