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BEST PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY: VISITING CONGRESS

MEETING LOGISTICS

DO: Schedule an appointment. This increases your likelihood of meeting with the Senator or Representative. You will want to contact the scheduler for that member of Congress, or contact NAHMA for assistance in setting the appointment.

DON'T: Refuse to meet with staff if the Senator or Representative is not available. Members of Congress rely on their staff to advise them on important issues. They depend on staff to know policy details—the pros, cons, who supports legislation, who opposes it, and most importantly—how a vote will affect their districts.

ESTABLISH A LOCAL CONNECTION

DO: Let the Member/staff know that you are a constituent living in their district or that you operate affordable properties in their district. Talk about your properties. How many residents live there? What federal programs support these properties? Do the tenants receive social services? Is it a Community of Quality award winner? Bring pictures of the property to show the positive results of federal affordable housing programs. Bring a print out of affordable housing in your Representative's District or State from NAHMA Maps at <http://nahma.apartmentsmart.com>. You can also give your Representative the link to browse the site as well.

DON'T: Discuss campaign contributions. It's a very thin line between bad form and illegal behavior. The campaign office and official Congressional office are legally and functionally separate entities. Keep your discussions with Congressional staff and the Members limited to policy issues (unless you are at a campaign event). NEVER offer a quid pro quo under any circumstance.

DELIVERING YOUR MESSAGE

DO: Know your audience—especially the Members' committee assignments. Before your meetings, visit the Members' websites to get a feel for their policy priorities and major issues facing their districts. Most legislation is written at the committee level, so it is important to know your Members' committee assignments. If your Members serve on the House or Senate Appropriations Committees, emphasize *funding* for HUD and RHS housing programs. If your Members serve on the House Financial Services Committee or the Senate Banking Committee, concentrate on ideas to improve HUD and RHS multifamily *housing programs*. Finally, if your members serve on the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee or the Senate Finance Committee, make sure to discuss *Low Income Housing Tax Credit* issues. Visit NAHMA's Grassroots Action webpage or contact NAHMA staff if you need help identifying your Members of Congress or arranging congressional visits.

DON'T: Presume the Member or staff are housing experts; keep your message concise and easy to understand. You will have 30 minutes or less to discuss your issues, so focus on your top 3 priorities. Assume the Member and staff have no industry experience—multifamily and regulatory terminology will most likely be new to them. Briefly explain the problem and what the Member can do to help solve it (such as introducing or cosponsoring a bill, signing a letter, voting for an amendment, etc.) *Emphasize how the problem affects the Members' constituents—including your properties and your residents—and why your* PROTECTING THE INTERESTS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROPERTY MANAGERS AND OWNERS

recommendations will help. Talking points on important housing issues are available on NAHMA's grassroots advocacy website. NAHMA is also available to help you prepare your message.

HOSTING LEGISLATORS AT YOUR PROPERTY

DO: Invite your elected officials to visit your properties. A site visit at one of your properties provides your Congressman/Senator with a real-world look at how affordable housing benefits low-income individuals and families. These visits can also help to dispel any negative preconceived notions that the legislator may have about affordable housing programs.

DON'T: Pass up the opportunity to have property staff and residents involved. Including property staff and tenants in the site visit can improve the overall experience. The Congressman/Senator will have the opportunity to meet the individuals (and voters) served by housing assistance and this can further display the quality community development created by affordable housing.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

DO: Keep in mind that the legislative process is complicated and designed for gridlock. The legislative process is designed to be difficult. Thousands of bills are introduced in Congress every session, but only a few become law.

DON'T: Expect to win converts to your positions at every meeting. Reasonable people will disagree on issues, and some people will disagree for no good reason. Nevertheless, it is important to maintain a professional demeanor throughout any meeting with Members and congressional staff.

FOLLOW UP

DO: Keep in touch with the congressional staff contacts. Once you know who handles housing issues, you can direct your housing questions to a specific person instead of having your e-mail lost in the Member's general inbox or answered with an unresponsive form letter. Likewise, congressional staff are often interested in building relationships with constituents who can be resources for their policy questions

DON'T: Forget to send a quick thank you note after your meeting to the Member and/or staff. A simple e-mail serves this purpose.