



Bird-dogging and Town Halls

Updated resources for 2017

While members of Congress are home for the February congressional recess, our goal is to find every opportunity to put members of Congress on record by asking them directly to fully protect Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act, in addition to standing against President Trump's agenda. Grassroots momentum on these issues has been amazing and has already derailed Trump/GOP plans for a swift repeal and replace. Our goal for the recess from Feb 18-26 is to show significant opposition to Republican attempts to take away our health care. We can do this in two ways:

(1) Pressure members of Congress to meet with constituents at town halls and office meetings. If they refuse to host public meetings, consider hosting empty chair town hall events and/or birddog them at their office, fundraisers and/or their homes. Let's bring it to them!

(2) For those members of Congress who are holding public events like town halls, turn your members out to them. Share video and photos from the town hall with People's Action.

The town hall strategy has changed over the last few years as Republicans become increasingly unwilling to meet with constituents. We can anticipate fewer town halls and public appearances and the town halls that are scheduled could be highly managed – so we will again need to be creative. This memo is designed to provide guidance for utilizing public events with an eye towards meeting new challenges with practical solutions. We cover tips for [finding events](#), [prepping activists](#), [how to successfully bird-dog at the event](#), and [post-event protocol](#). The term "bird-dog" comes from hunting; the bird-dog's

job is to flush the birds out of the bushes and into the open. Birddogging is a strategy to make sure that members of Congress are accountable to their constituents and will answer questions about pressing concerns.

FINDING EVENTS - *Sometimes, our work is about finding members of Congress when they don't want to be found. Increasingly, members of Congress are being more secretive about their town hall events. Our goal is to find out where members of Congress will be holding events and to be visible at their events. If you can, have a team on alert, ready to swing into action once you find where they are. People's Action will also alert you to any town halls that we see.*

- **Use the list of town halls and other events** from the [Town Hall Project](#) or [this second list from progressive allies](#) that only lists GOP events.
- **Sign up on Members' website to receive regular campaign email updates.** Regularly check his or her office/campaign website, Twitter feed, and Facebook group. You can also subscribe to state and party email list which often share upcoming events. You can find your members of Congress offices and websites here - www.callmycongress.com.
- **Ask members to call and stop by the member of Congress office to ask about upcoming events.** Ask to be added to any list that announces events to supporters. Sometimes members of Congress will have

postcards or flyers available at their office announcing upcoming public appearances.

- **Set up a Google News Alert** (<http://www.google.com/alerts>) — for example for “Rep. Bob Smith” — to receive an email whenever your members of Congress is in the news. Regularly check newspapers, community calendars, and other websites for community appearances.
- **Follow national groups that track town halls** like American Bridge.
- **Fundraisers.** Check out a list of candidate fundraisers at politicalpartytime.org.
- **Allies and Enemies.** Ask allied groups and political activists for intelligence on Members' schedules. Similarly, join the lists of conservative groups who may get advanced information about the event from the members of Congress's office.
- **Media.** Before you attend or plan an event, reach out and explain why your group is protesting and provide them background materials and a quote. Journalists on deadline — even those who might not agree with you — appreciate when you provide easy material for a story. Find friendly members of the media to get info from. Some reporters really would like progressive issues to be part of the political debate.
- **Research their social network.** Through in-district activists, on-line information sources and past donations. Also find out where the members of Congress lives, goes to church and has club memberships.

EFFECTIVE BIRD-DOGGING - Hooray! You found a public event that you plan to attend or turn out members for. Here are a list of key steps to take before, during and after the event.

Before the event:

- **Who makes a good bird-dogger?** ANYONE can be a bird-dogger! The best qualification is being an average person with a point of view or a story to tell. And with good training you can be an excellent bird-dogger!

- **Call through your members.** Calling can be more successful than sending an email, as it allows you to discuss the event one-on-one with an activist and provide more detailed information. It also keeps your organizing “under the radar” so you don't tip off your members of Congress that you are doing turnout.
- **Plan for different venues.** Talk through how you will need to adjust your approach based on the forum e.g. talk show, coffee shop, press conference, street.
- **Practice, practice, practice.** Ask questions that make a point. Questions should have three parts – a fact (or brief story), statement of a problem, and pointed question. Each question should have a pre-determined goal. What will listeners learn from your question regardless of how it is answered? Be prepared with good follow-up. It is very important to be comfortable asking your question and to be able to ask them clearly! For more background of members of Congress positions on issues visit VoteSmart.org.
- **Assign roles.** Particularly if you have activists attending with you, assign each activist a role ahead of time. You will want some activists to ask questions, others to video, others to identify reporters, etc.
- **Inform the media.** It may be in your interest to let the media know that you and your members will be at the event asking questions about X, Y, and Z. You may also consider hosting a press conference the day before to frame your issues before the members of Congress can, set expectations, and to engage the media.

Just prior to the event/At the event:

- **Be an early-bird bird-dogger.** Arrive an hour early and see the space and plan logistics. Where will you sit? Which way will the members of Congress likely enter and exit the building? Where is the best place for a video camera?

- **Host a rally outside of the event before it starts.** Even if you can't get a question addressed to the members of Congress, the media will see that there is public support/opposition for this issue and may raise it with the members of Congress in their follow-up or include your rally in its coverage. Assign 1 – 2 people to document the rally with pictures and video.
- **Sticker up.** Assign one person to distribute stickers to some of your activists. This shows issue support in the room, which reporters will pick up on even if you can't get a question in. Be sure to leave stickers off any activists who hope to ask a question, though.
- **Picture your question.** Many members of Congress are using "question screeners" at their events to ensure they don't get asked any questions they don't want to answer. Make sure you take a picture of your question card before you hand it in. This way, you have video proof that you submitted questions that they refused to answer.
- **Massage the message.** Likewise, if you have to pre-submit your question's category, use non-buzzwords to get past the screener. For example, use "public safety" in place of "gun violence."
- **Sit strategically.** Try to fill the front row and also put clusters of volunteers around the room and around your spokespeople. Having like-minded people around you often makes activists more comfortable and confident.
- **Don't take no for an answer.** Don't be afraid to say – Congressman/woman, that doesn't answer my question. Then repeat it.
- **Use your phone video camera.** Video the interaction to provide a record of the event for the public, your members and the press. Have a back-up plan!
- **Real-time reporting.** Assign one person to be your real-time reporter. Create a Twitter handle and share the live feed at the event. Be sure to tag the member of Congress's

official Twitter page to get in their feed.

- **Follow in and follow out.** Because town hall events are becoming ever more scripted, some of our best bird dog moments come when we catch members of Congress entering or leaving from an event. It's important to have a short powerful question to gain their attention. eg *Obamacare saved my sister's life -- can you promise me that you will not take away her coverage?* Be sure that your videographer is there to video the exchange. Each organization will have their own protocol around a member of Congress's personal space and boundaries, so be sure to discuss this ahead of time.

TWITTER

- **Keep tweets short** - Tweets that are around 100 characters get the most retweets and replies.
- **Sharing unique, interesting content** gets attention to your organization and our issues! And tracking Presidential Candidates is breaking news!
- **Include a few key hashtags** – Include the Candidates hashtag and one on the issue. For more on hashtags see <https://media.twitter.com/best-practice/using-hashtags> and our Resource file for key hashtag lists.
- **Use pictures & images** Twitter displays images in their timeline, so share away! Visual content always gets more engagement.

POST EVENT PROTOCOL – *After the event, be sure to follow up with your activists and media.*

- **Time is important.** If you get a newsworthy response – get it out ASAP!!!! On facebook, blogs, to national partners! Typically the average story will run for two days or less, so get your message and information out early. If you are attending an event sponsored by a champion, share the video or press releases with their staff too.
- **Go to the press - don't wait for them to come to you.** It is not uncommon for press to have a segregated area during town

halls. Be sure to use your time to connect with them and see if there are interested in a member story.

- **Debrief with your team.** After the event – discuss how it went, what you learned, and what you might do better next time. How were you most successful (or not) at asking questions. What are the top messages we need to communicate coming out of this event?
- **Share your success.** If you have other tactics that work – let us know so we can pass on to others!

BUILDING THE CASE - *Even with your efforts to find your members of Congress, you may find that he or she isn't holding any public events or they are in areas to remote for turn-out. At this point, it's time for a different strategy – building the case. Organizers need to build in a process for escalation as they move along the summer timeline because these confrontations lose credibility if they seem gratuitous. Creating a pretext for escalation also increases the comfort level of activists who are the face of the confrontation.*

- **Call the Members' office** and ask for a list of the member's appearance schedule. Call every day. If they don't give information, share this information with volunteers and the media. When we ramp up to visit at their home, club or church we can share that we tried to meet at their office first – but they didn't respond.
- **Ask for an in-person meeting with the Member;** if the member won't give you a meeting or only a meeting with staff, then you have an excuse to escalate to more aggressive action like tracking him or her down.
- **Have your members and allies ask for meetings.** Flood their office with calls. Many members of Congress also have online meeting requests. Have your members submit lots of requests. If you get a meeting, great. If not, you'll have a lot more members ready to take it up to the next notch.

- **Ask for a Commitment.** Ask the member for a commitment to hold a public meeting. The activists can call and ask for an answer to their request *in writing*. Then once they have letters they can use those as part of an action when they escalate or as their physical evidence to explain why they are escalating and demonstrate that we've tried taking the routine avenues to communicate with the members of Congress, and now we are forced to be more aggressive. Publicize members of Congress's refusal to meet with op-ed's and letters to the editor. Create a catchy slogan like "Sneaky Sam" to create buzz about their refusal to meet with constituents.
- **Host an empty-chair town hall meeting.** If your members of Congress refuses to meet with you, host your own town hall meeting to collect testimony and stories that you can then deliver to the members of Congress office or home.
- **Bring it to them.** If you are having no luck getting a response, you are now ready to bring the action to them. Lives are the balance. It's okay to make people uncomfortable. You can stake out the location and hope to surprise them there. Even if they are not there, picketing and leafleting their neighborhood, clubs and church creates tension, is newsworthy and puts pressure on the target. Make their absence an issue – make up posters asking if the members of Congress is MIA – or have flyers modeled on the missing persons notices on milk cartons or having a life-size likeness of the members of Congress that you bring with you. Eg - <http://www.cardboardcutouts.com/>

Information Sources: HCAN, MoveON, American Friends Service Committee, CCAG, Granite State Progress, Indivisible guide.