NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE
RETIREMENT ADMINISTRATORS

Helpful Hints for Congressional Visits

NASRA Administrators' Meeting

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE RETIREMENT ADMINISTRATORS
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The Value of Establishing Ties with Your Congressional Delegation and Their Staff

NASRA members are strongly encouraged to foster relationships with members of their congressional delegation and key staff in their Washington, D.C. offices. It is one of the principal reasons NASRA holds a winter administrators' meeting in the nation's capitol each year. New federal legislative and regulatory initiatives are forwarded each session and most offices are not familiar with pension issues in general, let alone knowledgeable of the possible impacts on their state's retirement system and its many participants.

This year will be particularly important. The leadership of the Congress has shifted and there are 55 new House members, 10 new Senators and countless changes to legislative staff. This presents a unique opportunity to educate offices and cultivate relationships.

This new session of Congress is additionally critical as some policymakers, thought leaders and the media are questioning whether, in the wake of last year's corporate pension reform legislation, public pensions should be the next target. Already, the Senate Finance Committee has requested that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigate and issue a report on state pension and healthcare liabilities and management. In addition, restoration of tough pay-as-you-go budgeting likely will put many revenue raisers outlined in past congressional reports (including repeal of pick-ups, FICA taxation of fringe benefits and other tax code changes) back on the table as legislators look for offsets.

Unfortunately, inaccurate and misleading information that your delegation reads in the press or obtains from "opponents" can be perceived as accurate and credible. Thus, the burden is on public plan representatives to relay clear, accurate information to their members of Congress.

Establishing ongoing contact with your delegation and their key staff will greatly increase their understanding of your plan and enhance your ability to ensure federal policies are helpful, not harmful, to your plan. **If you do not have time to schedule a meeting with every office, dropping off summary information on your plan and public plans in general with your business card can be extremely advantageous – and then make a follow-up call when you are back home to ensure they received the information and answer any questions.**

Many of you are experienced at effective congressional relations. For those of you who are not, or for those of you that have indicated you would appreciate having a checklist to prepare for Capitol Hill meetings, the following are some suggestions that may be helpful:

✓ Visiting Members in Their District, and Washington-DC Based Staff While in the Nation's Capitol

The Importance of Visiting Members in their District.

Often, the best time to meet with members of your delegation is when they are home during a District Work Period. This is usually when members are most receptive to hearing from their constituencies and less distracted by the "business of the nation." This is also a good time to thank them for help on past legislation or regulations, update them on the status of your plan, and answer any questions they may have. You could also arrange a photo opportunity to go in your membership newsletter.

Cultivating a Relationship with Washington DC-Based Staff

While there are many opportunities to visit with members of Congress in their district, your time in Washington, DC allows you to meet directly with the legislative staff who make policy recommendations and who wield a great deal of influence with their bosses. Washington staff often does not get out to the district offices. Thus, meeting with staff in Washington, DC is extremely important. The NASRA winter directors' meeting is a helpful time to meet as it kicks off a new Congressional session.

✓ Prepare a One-Pager or Primer

Personal meetings with Congressional members and staff can be extremely effective in educating them about your pension system and its importance to their state AND THEIR CONSTITUENTS. Be prepared for the Washington-based staff to know little about state government operations, as many members and their staff do not necessarily come from state or local government. Additionally, staff may know even less about the state pension system or pensions in general.

It is advisable to provide members and staff with a "leave behind" packet of information on public pensions, including a brief primer or one-page handout on the basics of your plan. Plan primers that break out information by county or district can be extremely valuable to a member. Compiling this information will better prepare you for your meeting and allow you to highlight key information for the legislator and their staff, including:

- The number of participants, retirees and beneficiaries covered by your system (illustrate how many of their constituents you represent);
- The amount of distributions paid to beneficiaries (demonstrating the direct value to the local economy and revenues);
- The portion of benefits attributable to investment income and employee contributions (try to dispel any misconceptions that this is a transfer from taxpayers to public retirees—advance-funding, by design, allows there to be more coming out than going in);
- A member snapshot (classes of employees covered, average salary; average benefit, average years in retirement, percent that stay in-state after retirement; etc.);
- The system's assets and the investment portfolio (i.e. invested professionally and prudently into important parts of the financial markets);
- The types of benefits offered through the plan (disability, life, health, deferred comp, etc.) that convey if it is more than just a pension plan;
- The governance structure of the plan (illustrating the comprehensive and open regulation of these retirement plans and strong protections for their participants and assets).

NASRA staff has prepared a one-page handout regarding key facts on public sector plans as a whole, as well as a draft template you can use for your system. Keith Brainard, keithb@nasra.org, would also be happy to provide assistance.

✓ Read Biographies of your Delegation

Read the biographical sketch in the Congressional directory or on the member's web site (all members' pages are listed on www.house.gov or www.senate.gov) to better understand the member's priorities, on what committee and subcommittees they serve, as well as their seniority on those committees. It also is helpful to read recent local and national news articles about the members to learn the range of issues they are facing.

✓ Learn Committee Assignments

There are thousands of pieces of federal legislation introduced each session. All serious consideration of bills is conducted through committees. Members tend to concentrate on issues covered by the committees on which they serve and rely on colleagues or well-informed constituents (like you) or lobbyists (like association staff or firms representing pension plans) for other issues.

The committees with jurisdiction over public pension plans are the **House Ways and Means** and **Senate Finance Committees**. A more focused discussion on the nuances of your state system and public plans is critical for members of your delegation who sit on those committees.

Members sitting on the **House Education and the Workforce Committee** or the **Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee** have jurisdiction over ERISA and may have a better understanding of pension issues, but may need more knowledge regarding the governance of non-ERISA plans.

Members of your delegation who are not on these committees still need to learn of issues that impact your system, but may require a more fundamental education on the topics.

✓ Establish a Personal Connection

Ask the staff if they are from your state, where they attended college, if they have family members who have worked for the state or are a teacher, etc. It also is extremely important to learn (and relay to staff) if the member of Congress was a participant in your plan and is/will be a beneficiary.

✓ Offer to be a Resource

It often is useful for members and staff to have a contact in the home state that understands pension issues, especially as retirement policy issues gain more attention. Leave your business card and let staff know that they can call on you with any questions regarding state benefit issues or any other retirement-related topics.

Also, refer them to NASRA's Washington Office or other national pension organizations for information. This will help them understand that many organizations share your views and that public pension issues are important in every state and supported by many key national organizations such as the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties, the Fraternal Order of Police, the International Association of Fire Fighters, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, AFSCME, and over twenty others. These important national organizations work together on key pension policy issues.

✓ Communicate Critical Information in Your Meeting

The following tips were developed by communications experts to assist with relaying the most critical information to members of Congress and staff, who are rarely experts on our issues, and often pressed for time:

- **Develop Your Key Messages.** In an information overload society, it is more difficult than ever to make a lasting impression. Prior to the meeting, develop the top three key points or "messages" that the legislator/staffer should understand and remember after your meeting. Messages that resonate are clear, concise, and compelling. Throughout the course of the meeting, subtly repeat the messages at least 3 times to ensure your point is made. It also helpful to ensure any background information you leave behind contains your key messages. (Many messages, materials, data and information that have been developed by or shared with NASRA can be found on the **NASRA web site**)
- **Provide Facts, Data, Anecdotes and Analogies – And Make It Local.** You will be more memorable, understandable and credible if your messages are supported by data and create a visual image in the mind's eye. For example, provide a chart of the economic impact of

your pension fund in that legislative district or independent report regarding your system. You also can provide a real life example of a local police officer's or teacher's salary, contribution to the pension system and modest retirement benefit.

- **Prepare a 2-Minute and 20-Minute Presentation.** You may have a 20 minute meeting scheduled, but the Member is called for a floor vote. Or a 5 minute meeting will run longer if you have piqued their interest. Always be prepared with your "elevator" pitch and the longer presentation.
- **Ask Questions.** Don't be reluctant to politely ask of their concerns, knowledge base, position, or thoughts. The more you know your audience, the better you can address any issues or strengthen your relationship.
- **Be Prepared for the Tough Questions.** Carefully think through in advance the most difficult questions you may be asked – and prepare your responses. If you receive an unanticipated question and don't have the answer, don't speculate or guess. It's acceptable to say you don't have that information, but commit to follow-up with a response.
- **Rehearse Your Message Delivery.** Run through your presentation several times before the meeting including possible tough questions. Practice will increase competence and confidence.

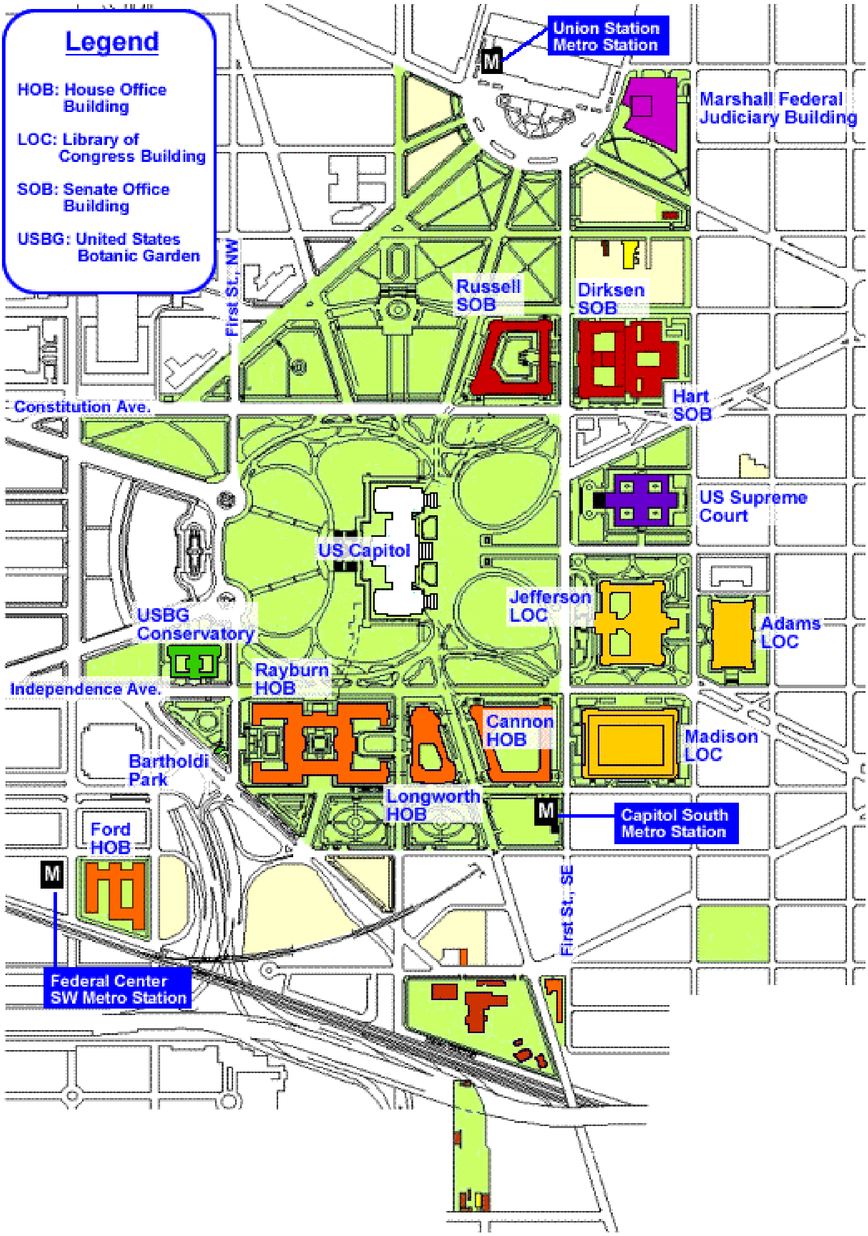
SCHEDULING TIPS

Below are some helpful steps to assist you and your scheduler in arranging visits with your Congressional delegation. **If you do not have time to schedule a meeting with every office, drop off a primer or packet of information on your plan with your business card. A "pop-in" to introduce yourself to the staff can also be extremely advantageous.**

- Call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 225-3121 and ask to be connected to a specific Congress member's office (direct phone numbers can also be obtained from the Internet at www.house.gov or www.senate.gov).
- If you plan to meet with staff (which is encouraged) and you do not know them by name, ask for the staff person responsible for pension tax issues. (If you plan to meet with the member of Congress directly, ask for his/her scheduler).

- Explain who you are and who you represent (Name, Title, System, number of participants).
- Offer to send advance materials about the retirement system, such as your popular report or pension primer. *(Note: ask for an e-mail address and/or fax number to which materials can be sent, as mail can be significantly delayed).*
- **Capitol Security.** Added security measures and construction may increase the time needed to go between House and Senate office buildings. If you have meetings in the Capitol, you are required to show photo identification and check-in at the front security station. **A map of the Capitol grounds and office locations is attached.**
- **Follow-up**. Take notes following your meeting to keep a log of the staff contacts and their interest in public pension issues. If possible, forward them to the NASRA Washington, DC office so we know who has heard from home and who may be helpful on issues in the future. (There is no comparison to an office that has met with and/or has a relationship with their state pension system).

If you have any questions, would like additional information, or need any assistance, please do not hesitate to call the NASRA Washington Office at 202-624-1417, or email jeannine@nasra.org.


Legend
HOB: House Office Building
LOC: Library of Congress Building
SOB: Senate Office Building
USBG: United States Botanic Garden
Union Station Metro Station
Marshall Federal Judiciary Building
Russell SOB
Dirksen SOB
Hart SOB
First St., NW
Constitution Ave.
US Supreme Court
US Capitol
Jefferson LOC
Adams LOC
USBG Conservatory
Rayburn HOB
Independence Ave.
Cannon HOB
Madison LOC
Bartholdi Park
Longworth HOB
Capitol South Metro Station
Ford HOB
First St., SE
Federal Center SW Metro Station