

Neighbor to Neighbor Visits

Visiting your Members of Congress in their home offices

What are Neighbor to Neighbor Visits?

When Members of Congress know that their constituents care about immigrant and refugee rights, they vote accordingly. Establishing and nurturing relationships with your Senators and Representatives is crucial to enacting immigration policies that protect and affirm the rights of immigrants and refugees, and also to stopping proposals that would negatively impact these communities. Every Senator and Representative has an office – often multiple offices – in their home state. They work from these local offices during "congressional recess," making it convenient for your voice to be heard (see last page of this toolkit for the House and Senate Calendars). Neighbor to Neighbor visits are meetings that you and others in your community set up with your Members of Congress and/or their staff to urge them to genuinely support and stand with immigrants and refugees, and their communities.

Purpose of Neighbor to Neighbor In-District Visits

1. To ask your Members of Congress to support immigration policies that value family unity, protect vulnerable populations and affirm the dignity of all persons.
2. To put our faith into action to make sure your Senators and Representative understand that their constituents and people of faith care about welcoming immigrants and refugees in their communities.
3. To build relationships between people of faith and public officials who make decisions that impact our communities.

Theological Grounding

Hospitality for newly arrived neighbors is supported by the sacred texts of all faiths, and is rooted in the inherent integrity and humans rights of all individuals. You may want to lift up these and other texts during your visits or in preparation for them, reflecting on the importance of this work.

Jewish tradition is clear on the treatment of immigrants, demanding of us concern for the stranger in our midst. The Torah commands, *“When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”* (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Jesus teaches that in welcoming the sojourner, we welcome Jesus himself. *“I was a stranger and you welcomed me”* (Matthew 25:35). The ethic between neighbors that Jesus models and teaches for all of his followers to exemplify is found in the Good Samaritan story, when he defines who the good neighbor is as *“the one who showed mercy.”* (Luke 10:37).

In Islam, care for the neighbor is affirmed in teachings to *“seek for mankind that of which you are desirous for yourself, that you may be a believer; treat well as a neighbor the one who lives near you”* (Sunnah).

Planning your Neighbor to Neighbor Visit

Before the visit:

- 1. Get a team together:** Before you meet with your Member of Congress, get a team together. A team ideally includes faith leaders from different traditions, people whose lives have been directly impacted by the immigration system, people who volunteer or work teaching English or resettling refugees, etc. Be strategic in finding team members and community leaders who best represent your community's call for just immigration policies that foster welcoming communities and who the Member may already know or respect. Your team should commit to building an ongoing relationship with the office. Aim for 5-10 participants, though a larger group can be a powerful sign of support. Check with the scheduler to see how many people their office can accommodate and be sure to plan well, so that you are focused on your message and everyone knows their specific roles.
- 2. Learn about who represents your community in Congress:** Go to www.house.gov and www.senate.gov to find out which Members of Congress represent you and your surrounding community. Their websites and a "Google" search will show how they have voted before and what they have said about immigration reform, as well as biographical sketches, campaign statements, past occupations, religion, political and social memberships, areas of interest and positions on other issues, all of which can inform your approach to the meeting.
- 3. Have a plan:** Before your visit, *always* meet with the other participants to assign roles, including the facilitator, the personal story, specific points and the 'ask'. Practice by role playing before the meeting so that everyone feels comfortable and knows what to do. Review your talking points and prepare your materials. In order to show the broad support of faith communities, consider bringing the Interfaith Immigration Coalition's Platform, which outlines the types of positive reform faith communities seek. You may also want to include other materials, such as media clips of local events and fact sheets showing the faith community's support for positive immigration policies. The most current leave-behind resources can be found at: <http://interfaithimmigration.org/neighbor>.

Roles:

The Facilitator will kick off the meeting by introducing the group, explaining the purpose for the meeting, and providing space for each person to briefly introduce themselves. The facilitator will also jump in if the meeting goes off-track and redirect the conversation.

The Personal Story is key to every meeting. Someone should be present who has either been directly impacted by the broken immigration system, or has worked closely with individuals who have been separated from family members, detained or deported. Telling these stories will show how peoples' lives are impacted and how your community would benefit from positive immigration legislation, as well as the negative consequences of proposed anti-immigrant bills.

Point People on Specific Issues: There will be specific issues your group will want to discuss, which you should decide while planning the meeting. See the IIC website for most up to date resources and legislation for guidance on issues to emphasize.

The Ask is the critical part of the visit when you ask for the member of Congress to support positive reforms and defend against proposals that would adversely affect immigrant and refugee communities, listen carefully and ask for clarification if what they say is vague.

- 4. Schedule a meeting.** Call your Member's local office to request a meeting. Make sure to tell them how many other faith leaders and community members would like to attend. If the member is unavailable, ask to meet with staff who work on immigration issues. You may have to send an email or fill out a form. Don't be discouraged if you need to follow-up for a response.

During the Visit:

Below is a suggested framework, but please adapt it to fit your team and Member of Congress.

Introductions

The Facilitator should start the meeting by thanking the Member for their time, introducing the group as a whole, and then having each person introduce themselves. Each participant should state the faith community they represent to show the power of the group.

People of faith throughout (town/city/state) are committed to acting out our faith by being good neighbors to immigrant families and building stronger, more welcoming communities. We do this by (Include a story of how your community supports immigrants –ESL classes, legal clinics, etc).

We count you, Sen./Rep. _____, as our neighbor, too. We commend you for demonstrating the hospitality of our community by (If possible, find positive comments / proposals).

We'd like to know how you plan to be a good neighbor to immigrant workers and families, especially as Congress considers immigration policies this year. We'd like to share about specific issues we care about. Let's start with introductions (everyone introduces themselves and affiliation)

Personal Story

Someone should share a story showing the need for just immigration policies.

Specific Issue Points

Provide the Member or staff relevant materials, including resources found on the Interfaith Immigration Coalition's website and explain why specific issues are important to your community. Some examples are on the following page.

Make your ask

We believe that in order to truly be good neighbors to our immigrant and refugee brothers and sisters, we must recognize the contributions and value they bring to our communities. Can we count on you to support positive reforms and defend against proposals that would adversely affect immigrant and refugee communities? How can we best support you in our mutual goal?

Be as specific as you can about proposals by visiting the IIC website on current legislation. When they answer, listen well and take notes. While they may not agree with you on all these issues, try to find common ground to continue to work together on. You'll likely not convince them to change their mind in one meeting, but you can intentionally build a relationship that can transform their perspective and stance. Much of advocacy involves listening, and providing opportunities for the member to share their priorities and concerns and ask questions. Look for indications of the members' views, and finding opportunities to provide helpful information or correct misinformation. Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard instead of only being talked at. Ask questions and engage in conversation. Answer questions honestly. If you don't know the answer, say that you don't know but you will find out. Assign one person in the group to follow up.

Thank you & invitation

Thank them and invite them to an upcoming prayer vigil, service or event you are planning. Offer to be a resource to them, and remember to get the staffers' business cards. Consider asking them to take a photo with your group – most politicians love the photo opportunity!

After the visit:

Debrief your meeting

It's important to make sure you and your group are on the same page immediately after leaving the meeting, while the conversation is fresh in your mind. Make sure to leave the office building, so your debrief conversation can't be overheard. As a group, review: What did we hear? Did we get what we wanted? What are the next steps? It's also important to evaluate your group's work. How did we do as a team? Share the information learned during your meeting with your state coalition, immigrants' rights groups, and other allies.

Follow up with your Member of Congress

Choose one person to send a follow up email attaching the documents mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, and continuing to engage the member and staff in your group's work. Send the staff you met an email thanking them for their time, attaching any documents you mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, once again making your case against negative proposals and for positive immigration legislation, and inviting them to an upcoming event.

Call Washington, D.C.

The Capitol Switchboard (202) 224-3121 can connect you to the DC offices of your Senators and Representative. Introduce yourself as a constituent and ask for the staffer who works on immigration. Tell them about your meeting with their local office, ask what they are doing to support positive reforms and defend against proposals that would adversely affect immigrant and refugee communities. Oftentimes the local and DC offices do not communicate about visits, so it's important to follow up with the DC office as well.

Let us know how your visit went

It's very important for us know about where members stand on immigration reform. After you meet or speak with someone from your Member of Congress' local and/or DC offices, please fill out this form: goo.gl/l197BJ or go to <http://www.interfaithimmigration.org/neighbor>. Advocates in DC will then follow up with the DC staff to reinforce your visit and answer any specific questions about legislative proposals. We will also share with you what we are hearing from their DC staff.

Thank you for making these important visits. Please feel free to contact anyone in the Interfaith Immigration Coalition about how we can be supportive of your work. A list of member organizations and contacts can be found at www.interfaithimmigration.org/about/organizations and www.interfaithimmigration.org/about/contact-information.

The Interfaith Immigration Coalition is brought together across many theological traditions with a common call to seek just policies that lift up the God-given dignity of every individual. We look forward to faithful partnership with members of the 115th Congress to continue our work to protect the rights, dignity, and safety of all refugees and migrants. We are committed to:

Prioritizing family unity: Our faiths teach us that families are a basic unit of strong communities. **We urge you to affirm the importance of family-based immigration visas and ensure that children do not have to live in fear of a parent being taken from them at any moment.**

Protecting undocumented young people: Almost 800,000 undocumented youth and young adults who are already part of the fabric of our society have, since 2012, had the opportunity to work, pursue their dreams, and benefit their communities without fear of deportation. We will continue to work toward legislative solutions that will protect these and other undocumented members of our communities. **We urge you to work to immediately pass the BRIDGE Act, bipartisan legislation that will protect these young people.**

Upholding religious freedom: As faith communities, we understand that protecting individuals regardless of their religion is not only an American value but is essential to a faithful call for justice. The U.S. has historically welcomed refugees and immigrants without regard for the religion they practice. **We urge you to reject all proposals to ban, register, or otherwise discriminate against individuals based on their religion.**

Ensuring discretion in immigration enforcement: Many immigrants are long-time residents of U.S. communities. This includes individuals who have made mistakes in the past and have changed their lives for the better. Unjust immigration policies penalize non-citizens more severely than their U.S. citizen peers, making minor violations subject not only to prison sentences but also prolonged detention and deportation, sometimes years after the initial sentence has already been served. **We urge you to oppose policies that result in members of our communities being detained and deported for old, minor, or nonviolent crimes for which they have already faced consequences and instead affirm the use of prosecutorial and judicial discretion.**

Pursuing the civil and human rights of border communities: The borderlands are a dynamic home to bi-national and indigenous communities. Current enforcement practices are devastating these communities, contributing to the deaths of thousands of migrants traveling in remote regions and violating the rights of U.S. citizens and migrants alike. **We urge you to reject further militarization of the border, oppose border enforcement policies that violate human and civil rights and affirm policies that include strong oversight and accountability mechanisms, including community engagement.**

Safeguarding refugee resettlement and asylum: The U.S. refugee resettlement program is a life-saving public-private partnership with historical bipartisan support and has been lifted up as a standard of excellence for the rest of the world. All people fleeing to safety deserve access to protection and to be treated with dignity. Communities of faith are ready and willing to continue to welcome refugees and other vulnerable individuals into our homes, communities, and hearts. **We urge you to support refugee resettlement and access to asylum – programs governed by core humanitarian principles and grounded in values of hospitality, compassion, and welcome.**

Defending community trust policies: Community safety is best protected when all community members, regardless of immigration status, feel safe approaching law enforcement officials and do not fear that they, their family, or other community members will be detained or deported as a result of such interaction. **We urge you to oppose policies that penalize communities and local police departments for prioritizing community safety over their participation in federal immigration enforcement activities.**

2017 CONGRESSIONAL CALENDAR

115th Congress, First Session

January

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■ Senate in Session
■ House in Session

