

Legislative Breakfast

Everyone loves a free breakfast, so invite your legislators to join you and take the opportunity to tell them exactly what they can do to help you in your efforts.

AGE GROUP: high school students and above

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: 5 or more

TIME: 2 months

RESOURCES: food, paper, computer, telephone, pens

COST: \$150-\$400

Who says that only adults have access to politicians? Who says to have power you must have money? Nonsense. While groups like the tobacco industry like to make friends with Congress and your state legislators so that they can manipulate the laws, you are not restricted from speaking with your elected officials. In fact, many legislators love to talk to young people.

And what is a better way to get someone interested in what you have to say than by offering them free food? You can organize a legislative breakfast in the school cafeteria or a dining room of your state legislature or a smoke-free restaurant, and hobnob with the power brokers.

This activity has three important goals:

- Educate legislators and their staff about the problem of tobacco use.
- Answer any questions they may have about this issue and your work.
- Express general support for stronger tobacco prevention efforts.

2 months before the event:

- Call your State Capitol Police. Ask if they allow people to sponsor legislative breakfasts. Chances are they do. Ask if you can reserve a time to sponsor a breakfast. If you need a Representative or Senator to sponsor the breakfast, call him/her and request their help in setting up your event. All these important phone numbers are listed on the web. Just search around.
- Send an invitation to all legislators requesting their presence. In the invitation give them a reason to come. "Come join us to talk about tobacco prevention and have a free breakfast." A simple email invitation will probably work. Make sure you let them know that their aides are also welcome to attend. Encourage legislators to send staff in their place if they cannot attend themselves.

4 weeks before the event:

- Call the legislator's offices and follow-up on the invitations you sent.
- Call a couple of legislators that have been supportive of tobacco prevention and ask them if they'd be willing to speak for a few minutes about the importance of the issue

2 weeks before the event:

- Email another invitation to those legislators that have not yet responded. Many legislators may just show up unannounced. Be prepared.
- Do the planning. Calculate how much food you will need based on how many people you are expecting.
- Create an agenda of topics you will cover at the event.

1 week before the event:

- Buy the food and drinks. A simple breakfast will do. Donuts work. Bananas work. Coffee works.
- Think about what you will say at the breakfast as people are gathered.

On the day of the legislative breakfast, relax. Legislators are not expecting to be 'blown away' by the production, they just want to talk to you and get free food. Remember to include staff in your agenda and make sure they have a good time and get your message. Staff members are often very influential with legislators and often have a certain amount of decision-making power.

Have a good time. If you have leftover food, you might consider donating it to a homeless shelter.

Interested in more? Check out kickbuttsday.org to find out more about the fight against tobacco and what youth advocates across the country are doing to take action.

Whether you host a legislative breakfast, just attend one, or set up an individual meeting with one of your public officials, make sure you plan ahead and do all of your research. By the time you go talk with a public official, make sure you know what you're talking about inside and out and don't be nervous!

We had a chance to meet with our members of Congress in Washington, DC, and have also met with local officials our hometowns, so we have a few tips for you. No matter what the situation, make sure you look respectful.

Try to be early! If you show up late for a meeting, it not only cuts down on the few minutes you have, but they aren't going to think you are serious about this meeting. Also, be prepared for last-minute changes. You may not end up meeting with your Senator or Representative because they may have to go to the floor to vote, give a speech, or meet with another member of Congress. If that is the case, you'll usually still with a staff person. Don't worry, staff people are just as valuable because they will take notes and relay all the information to the Senator or Representative.

Here's something important to keep in mind. When you actually get into the meeting, don't be discouraged if your representative has no idea what you're talking about. Remember thousands of bills are brought to Congress every year, and state and local governments are addressing many issues too. They probably just haven't seen your bill yet. That's what *you're* there for! When Becca went to Capitol Hill to talk about allowing the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to regulate tobacco, the only representatives who knew what was going on were the ones who had already co-sponsored the bill.

Have an outline prepared of what you want to say. Be ready to introduce yourself and the organization you are with, and don't forget to mention your hometown and state – you're a constituent! What have you and your group done in your state or town? Why are you here today, and what can your member of Congress do to help you? Let them know if you want them to co-sponsor a specific bill, and if so, be sure to tell them more about it and refer them to the additional materials you prepared.

Some words to the wise, during the meeting:

- Don't get off topic- your elected official, or even you, may start talking about things not related to the reason you are here. Don't let that happen. You have a very limited time frame.
- Don't get into an argument. This is a friendly conversation and we want them to stay on our side. If you get confrontational, then they won't appreciate you or the issue you are there for.

It helps if you get together a little packet to leave with your official before you go. Kaitlyn left a folder that had examples of tobacco ads that target kids and statistics about smoking rates for her state. They're not going to remember all of the facts and figures you just told them so it helps if they have something there to remind them. Business cards are also helpful if you can print some up to leave with the representatives and staff you meet with.

After the meeting, it is vital that you write a thank-you letter no matter how your meeting went. If they didn't support you, or weren't sure, then the thank-you is the perfect opportunity to remind them why your piece of legislation is important. If they did support you, then it's a great way to establish a relationship with that person, and also let them know that you appreciate what they're doing for tobacco prevention.