

# 2019 Congressional Recesses

## Resources for Effective Advocacy

Updated 2.11.2019

### Overview

#### The Importance of Upcoming Congressional Recesses

Members of Congress are scheduled to return home several times throughout the year, presenting unique opportunities for advocates to connect with representatives. Elected officials use this time to visit with constituents and gain a pulse of community priorities before heading back to Washington. Congress has several items on their to-do list this year, including: funding the government (for both FY19 and FY20), making technical fixes to the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, and potentially reauthorizing child nutrition programs. The policies in play will affect United Ways and communities in need.

Scheduled\* 2019 recesses include:

- February 18 - 21
- March 18 - 22
- \*\*April 15 – 26
- May 27 – 31
- July 1 – 5
- \*\*August 5 – September 6
- September 30 – October 11
- November 4 – 8 (House recess only)
- November 25 – 29
- December 16 – December 31

*\*scheduled as of 2.11.2019*

*\*\*indicates the most popular opportunities for in-district engagements: Spring and August Recesses*

Given how much is happening in Congress (and how rapidly), it will be critical for United Ways to leverage the upcoming recesses to educate members of Congress on what's at stake, particularly around the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program and charitable giving incentives.

#### Call to Action

Leverage Recesses to educate your Members of Congress by **meeting at their local offices**, by **hosting elected officials for a site visit** (ex. VITA site, 2-1-1 Call Center, local food bank or food pantry), or **attending a town hall**. **Participate in social media efforts** to spread public awareness on our issues.

*P.S. Prioritize VITA site visits during tax season!*

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## Opportunities for Action

Recess is an exceptional opportunity for you to cultivate relationships with your representatives and drive home the message that health, education and financial stability are critical for building strong communities. One of the easiest ways is to simply schedule a meeting to share about the work of your United Way and issues of importance to your community. Members of Congress welcome meeting with their constituents and should be available to meet in district and state offices during the Recess breaks.

You may consider inviting your members to a program of your United Way (i.e. VITA site, 2-1-1 call center, or volunteer event) or to tour a partner agency or program that you support (i.e. community health center, food bank, or early childhood program). In addition, many members will hold town hall meetings and will be making public appearances at local events. Town halls also present an opportunity to ask members what they are doing to support health, education and financial stability in your community.

### Opportunities for Action:

1. **Meet with your congressional representatives** during the upcoming Recesses and tell them about your United Way's work and priorities. If you haven't yet met with your federal representatives or you have new members of Congress representing your service area, this is a great time to introduce them to the work of your United Way and how you are serving their constituents. Identifying a Board Member, executive, or volunteer who could join to reinforce the importance of the ask will make the meeting especially impactful. Call your local office to ask for a meeting or see pages 3-6 for additional information on setting up a visit, meeting request templates, and what to expect. [After the meeting, please tell us about it!](#)
2. **Invite your member of Congress to attend a site visit** at your local United Way or a local program (i.e. VITA site, 2-1-1 call center, Head Start program, etc.) in your community. Inviting your member of Congress to a Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) site can be a powerful setting to discuss our financial stability priorities. As VITA celebrates 50 years of service in 2019, **we highly encourage VITA visits during the March 18 – 22 Recess**. Site visits are an important way to educate a member of Congress about the value of an issue or program serving children and their families. See page 6 for tips on organizing a site visit.
3. **Attend a local Town Hall Meeting** and ask elected officials to talk about their commitment

#### Did you know?

The last Republican House member to champion VITA became a fan of the program after going to a site visit? He went on to sponsor the VITA Permanence Act and invite a local United Way to testify at a committee hearing.

to advancing health, education, and financial stability in their district. Some Members of Congress will be hosting town halls or constituent coffees over recess. Check your Representative or Senator's website for posted information or call the local office directly to ask – they will be more than happy to share that information with you. In this setting, you will be with a group of constituents with diverse interests. You will need to prepare a succinct position and question to raise in the group setting. See page 8 for sample town hall questions.

**The extra mile:** *Alternatively, you could propose to co-host a town hall with your elected official. In 2017, one state United Way co-hosted a town hall with their Senator that was attended by non-profits organizations from around the state. This provided a positive environment for the Senator to interact with the non-profit community and demonstrated the United Way's incredible convening power.*

### Pro Tip

It can take time and persistence to line up a local meeting or site visit with your elected official. By knowing the dates of all the upcoming recesses this spring, you can have fallback options should your Members of Congress be unavailable for your first request.

**Request a meeting or site visit for the nearest Recess break and if they are unavailable, ask to get on the calendar for the next set of dates. You can never line up visits too early!**

## Meeting with Your Members



First and foremost, legislators **want and need** to hear from you. They **want** to hear from you because they want to win your support and to keep a good rapport with their constituency.

They **need** to hear from you because Washington can be a vacuum; it is your place to provide a boots-on-the-ground perspective they may be lacking.

You are the expert on your issue, and can offer a unique standpoint and context.

**Follow these 5 simple steps to schedule a meeting with your member, or their staff, in your home district. Prefer a video? Watch our tutorial [here](#).**

### 1. Find Your Office

To find the district office for your member of Congress (MOC), look up their contact information [here](#). By entering your zip code, you'll be able to access information for your federal elected officials. Click on the name of your member of Congress to find their office locations and phone numbers.

## 2. Know Your Content

When calling the office to schedule an appointment, you may be asked for the intended topic of discussion. **Familiarize yourself with the issues.** You can be brief and say that you want to share about the local work your United Way is doing in the community and also discuss key priorities in health, education or financial stability.

As you prepare for the visits, remember that your unique value-add is that you offer a local perspective and you are an expert on the community. Be sure to start collecting stories or brush up on your community impact statistics in preparation for your meeting. Data on your VITA results or the impact of projected reductions in charitable giving are helpful to Members of Congress.

## 3. Make the Call

Place a call to your Member of Congress' office using the phone number provided on the website, and ask to **speak to the scheduler.**

## 4. Let the Office Know You're a Constituent

When connected with the appropriate staff for scheduling an appointment, lead with the fact that **you are a constituent** of the member; this sends you to the front of the line! Follow with the framing you decided in Step # 2.

The staff that you speak with will instruct you on the process their office uses to schedule meetings. You may be able to set the appointment over the phone, or you may have to submit a specific form through their website. If you are instructed to email the office, feel free to use the *Template District Meeting Request below.*

\*Request a meeting with the Member, but don't dismiss the importance of being scheduled with key staff.

## 5. Follow-Up

A few days before your meeting contact the office to **confirm the time, location, and list of attendees.** Be sure to make 'The Ask' during your meeting, and follow-up with staff about any questions they may have during your discussion.

## Constituent Meeting Request Template

DATE: (DATE)  
TO: Office of The Hon. \_\_\_\_\_  
CC: (District Director or Regional Director)  
FROM: Name, United Way of X  
RE: **Constituent Meeting Request**

*Consult the Member's website or our [Find Your Elected Official tool](#) to find the location of the nearest regional office to your United Way.*

Dear Senator/Representative LAST NAME.

We are writing to request a meeting with you when you are visiting the STATE/DISTRICT during the upcoming recess, [DATES]. The purpose of this meeting is to share about the recent work United Way is leading in NAME /SERVICE AREA and to discuss key priorities for our community – such the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program and charitable giving incentives.

Attending this meeting will be name(s) and title(s) of meeting attendee(s).

Please do not hesitate to contact \_\_\_\_\_ (name, email address and number of the person responsible) with any questions about our meeting request. I will follow up with your office within a week of this request.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
Name  
United Way of X

## Preparing for Your Visits

***If you have secured a visit and need additional support, please reach out to [Sarah.Yergeau@unitedway.org](mailto:Sarah.Yergeau@unitedway.org). The UWW policy team wants to support you as you prepare!***

### Goals for In-District Visits:

- Build or strengthen relationship with Members of Congress.
  - We also have [this video](#) tutorial on how to build relationships at home!
- Position United Way as an expert on the community & partner for the Member
- Make the Collective Ask(s)

### Before Your Visits:

- Prepare to talk about 1-2 local highlights from your local United Way in your meetings.
- Feel free to bring accompanying materials (2-3 copies). Review your talking points, messages, and if you have multiple group members, assign roles. (ex: introductions, messages, “thank yous”)

### Expectations for Visits:

- Most meetings will last 10 – 20 minutes.
- Even if scheduled with the Member, you may meet with staff or the Member might walk in halfway through the meeting. (STAFF ARE IMPORTANT!)
- Pictures are welcomed.
- Dress is business professional.

### Sample Meeting Agenda:

*Note: If you are with a group, meet outside the office to discuss each person's role and talking points for the meeting.*

1. Introduce yourself, share connections, ask about staff
2. United Way network & context of visit (Visiting with members before they head back to Washington)
3. Your United Way(s): lift-up 1-2 local/state highlights
4. Transition to key messages on issues
5. Ask for Member's support on our issues and the latest outlook
6. Offer to be a resource and thank!

### After Your Visits:

- Take a moment to share about your visits on social media – Post photos and tag your members! They'll appreciate the positive publicity.
  - Use your post to reinforce the ask you shared. Ex. "Thanks [\[@MemberOfCongress\]](#) for meeting with us to discuss [\[insert issue\]](#). #UWAdvocate"
  - Use Hashtags: #UWAdvocate, #VITAworks
- **Immediately capture important notes and relay the information to United Way Worldwide's policy team so we can be sure to learn from your insights. [Fill out the feedback form.](#)**
- Send thanks & follow-up to the offices.

## Organizing a Site Visit

Organizing a site visit allows policymakers to see firsthand the value of the work your United Way does and to better understand the importance of an issue.

### What is the goal of site visits?

The goal is to educate elected officials about an issue that affects their constituents. Often, elected officials are removed from the programs that help their district residents. Site visits provide a direct connection to the issues facing everyday citizens and have the potential of increasing or strengthening the support of a policymaker for a critical policy issue or program. In addition, site visits can strengthen your relationship with your representatives and give them a greater understanding of the work of United Way.

### How do you organize a site visit?

- **Check out this video tutorial:** [How to Host a Local Event!](#)
- **Identify site visit location.** Consider whether you would like to host the site visit at your office or at an agency or program (i.e. VITA site, Head Start, Boys and Girls Club, community school, food bank or pantry).
- **Schedule the visit.** About four to six weeks in advance, send a written request and call your

policymaker's office to set up a time for the visit and expect to follow-up often to secure the date and time. To find the district office for your member of Congress (MOC), visit our find your elected official tool [here](#) or visit [House.gov](#) or [Senate.gov](#).

- **Plan the site visit agenda.** Consider having the policymaker participate in an activity that allows them to interact with children and families (i.e., hearing from program participants about their experience, packing a backpack with food, doing a Poverty Simulation, attending a meeting with parents, etc.).
- **Invite your supporters.** This is a great opportunity to include your Board members, donors, Women United leaders, Student United Ways and other affinity groups.
- **Alert the media.** If appropriate, consider inviting the media (in coordination with the Member's staff). This could be a great photo opportunity for both the policymakers and your United Way.
- **Confirm the visit.** At least one week before the visit, confirm the visit and send a copy of the itinerary.
- **Share on social media.** Post pictures of the event and tag the Member. Use this time to publicly thank them for their support of your local program, service, or initiative.
- **Follow up with a thank you.** Don't forget to follow-up with a thank you note immediately following the visit and share any relevant photographs.
- **Capture important notes and relay the information to United Way Worldwide's policy team:** [Feedback Form](#)

**Remember:** VITA site visits will be particularly helpful to advance our VITA policy priorities.

Given VITA turns 50 this year and tax season ends April 15, prioritize VITA site visits during the first few recesses of the year

## Attending a Town Hall

During recess, members of Congress often host town hall meetings in their home districts to hear from their constituents on critical national issues.

### What is the goal of a Town Hall Meeting?

A Town Hall is an informal public meeting where attendees can discuss issues with elected officials. Town Halls allow people to voice their opinions and ask questions of policymakers. They give officials a better understanding of the needs and challenges in their communities.

### What are the best practices for attending a Town Hall Meeting?

- Find out if there is a town hall scheduled in your district; visit your representatives' websites or call the local offices of your Senators and Representatives
- Arrive to the town hall meeting early
- Sit close to the microphone if there is one set up
- Come with questions written down on index cards
- Raise your hand; ask a question or submit questions beforehand

#### Don't Forget:

You could always propose to co-host a town hall with your elected official. This will allow you to define the audience and have input on the topics discussed. Additionally, it will position your United Way both as an information resource and community convener to your elected officials.