

Tips to Ease a “Terrifying” Congressional Visit

Joel Shoemaker



Joel Shoemaker is a member of ALSC'S Advocacy and Legislation Committee. He is the Library Director for the Illinois Prairie District Public Library, with six branches in rural Woodford County, and has been a magician for twenty-eight years.

They say that any chance to demonstrate the value of our services to our local congressperson is invaluable and, really, must be taken. They say to always have your “elevator speech” with you, should the need for declaration arise. And they say that as long as you study your talking points and memorize the materials you are leaving behind, you’ll be fine. No pressure. Among other things, that’s what they say, anyway.

So, when the Illinois Library Association (ILA) invited anyone going to ALA’s Annual Conference this past June in Washington, DC, to make an appointment with their congressperson’s office, I said yes. And, in the spirit of full disclosure, I had been to Capitol Hill once before, for National Library Legislative Day (NLLD).

Really, this should be easy by now. Yet, no matter how much you prepare, no matter how well you know your facts and figures, no matter how much they prepare you for this invaluable experience—and I believe it is an essential one, at this point—there’s something inevitably terrifying about all of this, isn’t there?

Just Me?

In case it’s not just me, in case there’s someone else out there that, in the future, finds themselves signing up for the simultaneously necessary yet terrifying assignment, here’s what I know from doing it twice.

The office is run by interns who, in some cases, are more terrified than you are. I follow instructions. It’s one of my favorite things to do. So, when ILA’s executive director tells me to arrive thirty minutes early, I do it. Shockingly, at least on this particular day, it takes twelve seconds to go through security. It takes fourteen seconds to put your belt back on. And suddenly you are in front of the giant door and you are twenty-nine minutes early for your appointment and, after pretending to be on the wrong floor and going up and down a few times to eat up some of that time it is still twenty-six minutes until your appointment, and you have nothing else to do but enter.

There is a sign outside congressman Darin LaHood’s (R-IL) office. It says something to the effect of the office belongs to the taxpayers and I am a taxpayer, so I walk in acting like I own the place because the sign says I do. There I am greeted by four people, significantly younger, all standing. And the office is the size of two walk-in closets.

They offer me Skittles and a cup of coffee. And I accept both because I’m not going to be rude, and because I deeply adore both of these things and maybe, just maybe, these are my people. And the Skittles and the coffee and the casual conversation make me feel at ease as I wait my turn.

They will listen to you. And then promptly move on. When it comes time for my appointment, I am led into a different office and I quickly realize

that this is a photo op for the congressman and, really, he's very busy and he tells me he's supportive and appreciative and they take my papers.

Of course, this is a bit of an overstatement. They do listen, and they are incredibly friendly. And, after you state all the memorized talking points, if there is time left, there is a wonderful opportunity to mention all of the wonderful things we do every single day.

Turns out, it is fairly easy to fill that small amount of time. After all, how easy is it to brag about our libraries!

Regarding the photo op, a piece of advice. Dress in a way that makes you feel comfortable. I wore a bowtie for marriage equality. It was a very subtle way to make a small political statement that didn't even come up in conversation and, it didn't need to. It offered me some kind of confidence. It put me at ease, if only just a bit. Plus, it made for a great photo.

Following up is basically the only thing that matters. And here is where I really believe we win. Both times I have been

to Capitol Hill, I have promptly followed up with a thank you e-mail and asked for a visit to my library. There is something to meeting them in person in DC first that makes them say yes, I think. Of course, I am more comfortable and confident in my own space, as I assume we all are. At the first visit, with a different congressman, at a previous library, I invited the newspaper and printed a 3D model of the White House.

Upon entering, that congressman said, "This is the loudest library I've ever been to." How great is that?

For the most recent visit, I invited therapy dogs and hosted an open house for local homeschoolers—again, just to make sure we were really, really busy.

Both times, a great relationship was formed. I can't say I changed the minds of a rural, conservative congressman to vote for any increased library funding, but at least I know they saw vibrant, vital institutions. Taxpayer money very well spent. &