



Tips for Hosting a Service Site Visit with a Member of Congress

(Updated August 7, 2023)

A visit to an AmeriCorps service project is the best way to showcase the critical services your program provides and the real-life benefits of fully funding AmeriCorps. Seeing AmeriCorps members in action is compelling and a successful site visit can help you cultivate a relationship with a lawmaker that will benefit your organization and AmeriCorps for the long term.

Here are some tips for requesting and leading a successful service site visit.

If you have questions or need help with any step in this process, contact Ray AlQaisi, our Congressional Affairs Director, at raymond.alqaisi@cityyear.org. **And don't forget to email Ray when you get a service site visit scheduled!**

1. **Send a formal invitation.** Even if you speak in person with a member of Congress or their staff about visiting your program, you must follow-up with a formal invitation. The first step is to call the lawmaker's office and ask for the scheduler's name and their preferred method for receiving invitations to events back in the state or district. Ideally, you will be given an email address for the scheduler, as physical mail goes through special security screening and can be delayed for 2+ weeks. If you know the policy staffer who handles AmeriCorps, you should copy them on your email to the congressional scheduler. If a board member or other community partner who knows your program well has a relationship with the legislator, ask for their help elevating your invitation. They could co-sign your letter or make follow-up phone call or email.
2. **Be flexible in suggesting potential dates/times for a site visit.** Scheduling can be difficult. In your initial outreach, offer several options of days/times that your program could welcome the lawmaker. Elected officials, particularly members of Congress, are often inundated with requests and have limited availability for visits, events, and engagements in the district. Your flexibility, to the extent possible, will improve the likelihood of successfully scheduling a visit.
3. **Be sure to follow-up on pending invitations.** Members of Congress receive far more requests for their time than they can reasonably fulfill, and sometimes invitations get lost. While you should be patient with the scheduler, you should follow up if you haven't received a response to a pending invitation after a week or more. Call the office or send the scheduler an email and confirm they received the invitation.
4. **Choose the right service location.** Members of Congress and elected officials who represent a specific geographic area will be most interested and willing to visit an AmeriCorps service site located within their congressional district or nearby. If you have multiple service locations, do your best to offer the opportunity to visit an AmeriCorps service location within the district they represent, but make sure the

location is also a strong example of your program's service model. If your program serves inside a school, health center, or any facility managed by another entity, make sure they know that you plan to invite an elected official to see your program. They may want to join the visit and help validate the critical impact your AmeriCorps members have on their operations.

5. **Once a visit is scheduled, let Voices for National Service know!** To maximize the success of your visit, we need to pool resources, experience, and expertise. We have tools that can enhance a visit with an elected official, and we can help answer your questions to make sure the visit is a success.
6. **Invite external validators to participate in the site visit.** Elected officials will want to know how the investment in AmeriCorps impacts the local community. It always helps to have external validators — such as private sector funders, board members, community partners, or school district representatives — join the visit, even if just for a few minutes, to speak in support of AmeriCorps and your impact in their community.
7. **Confirm whether the visit will be open or closed to press.** This will affect your preparation for the visit. If the elected official wishes to have the event open to press, a media advisory will have to be issued, in coordination with the elected official's office. If your AmeriCorps members serve inside another organization, your host may have local press contacts and relationships that they can involve. With permission from the lawmaker's communications office, you may wish to amplify the event through:
 - A joint press release posted across your channels (website, social media, newsletter, etc.)
 - Exclusive access of some kind for the press (data, interviews with AmeriCorps members, etc.)
8. **Be careful not to engage in political campaign activity.** As nonpartisan organizations that receive federal funds, AmeriCorps programs must only use visits with elected officials as opportunities to educate leaders about local programming. Visits may not occur in connection with any political campaign activities, and photos or videos of site visits may not be used in campaign materials. If you have questions, please reach out to Ray AlQaisi for clarification.
9. **Highlight the connection between federal funding and the impact your program has in the local community.** During the site visit, remember to explain that your program receives federal funding from the AmeriCorps agency (referred to as the Corporation for National and Community Service in the federal budget), which is then matched by private and local support. It is often worthwhile to offer some "AmeriCorps 101," even to those who may be expected to understand how the program works. Furthermore, be sure to show clear co-branding with AmeriCorps or AmeriCorps Seniors. For example, make sure your "AmeriCorps serves here" sign is prominently displayed during any site visit and any AmeriCorps members serving at the site that day are wearing their AmeriCorps branded gear.
10. **Provide briefing materials in advance of the visit.** Elected officials will almost always receive a briefing memo from their staff in advance of any event or appearance. Providing a briefing memo to the elected official's staff several days in advance of the scheduled visit will save them time, which they will appreciate, and ensure the right message is presented to the elected official. We can assist in providing relevant policy updates to include in a briefing memo.

11. **The ask:** After you've communicated AmeriCorps' importance to your community, you should ask the member of Congress and/or staffer to take specific action in support of national service. In the short term, the **ask** is to support AmeriCorps' needs for FY24 funding and refuse to cut its budget. This would provide an opportunity to follow up with the office and could garner a commitment to take action. Utilize Voices for National Service's [talking points and key messages](#) as a guide.
12. **Share about the visit on social media.** Make sure to take pictures of the elected official visiting your AmeriCorps program, and – with their office's permission – [tag the elected official](#), @AmeriCorps/@AmeriCorpsSr, and @Voices4Service when posting online. This provides an opportunity to thank the elected official publicly and, if the elected official retweets the picture from his or her account, generate publicity for your program and national service. We will retweet it too!
13. **Thank the elected official for visiting.** A simple thank you note can go a long way. At a minimum, follow-up with the elected official's staff via email, thank them for taking the time to visit, and provide any materials that were discussed or requested during the visit.
14. **Let us know how it went!** A successful visit can often lead to future engagement with the elected official. We encourage you to debrief with us after the visit to organize a follow-up plan and to ensure future engagement of the elected official that will build upon your great work. We hope you will share photos from the visit with us; please send to sarah.aldridge@cityyear.org.