

BJ_Bement_EndingPD_Political Contact Tips

Know who to contact and how.

Know who represents you and how to reach them. This includes all levels of government: Local, County, State and Federal. Pay attention to who is voted in and out of each election. I contacted my current representative before he was elected the first time. I went by his campaign office and introduced myself to the manager. Luckily Garret Graves walked in and engaged in the conversation. When I went to DC for the first time, he recognized me.

Have the web pages and social media links bookmarked.

Spend a few minutes clicking around on their pages to find contact information, local and remote office phone numbers, email addresses, and where to submit a request for a proclamation or appearance. When it is time to act, you will know where to go.

Develop a relationship.

It may be that the first time you contact their office, it is to ask for something, but try to get connected in other ways before you need something. Make yourself available to any event they may be a part of and invite them to appear at your functions. If you are doing something and there is a sizable crowd and there is an opportunity for them to say a few words, request an appearance.

For brief or impromptu interactions, have your introduction ready.

First, realize you are your own best advocate. Be confident. You matter. The elected official is just a human being like you. You do not need to be intimidated. Generally, you will talk to a staffer before you talk to the actual representative. It is more than just your name. It is who you are as their constituent. If you aren't in their district or area, they may not take time to listen. "My name is BJ Bement. I live in the Sherwood Forest area of Baton Rouge." (Adjust for the level of government, if state level, indicate your city. If it's federal, tell them your state or voting district). "I am a person living with Parkinson's Disease. I used to have a great-paying job at a chemical plant but had to stop working due to my diagnosis. I am passionate about issues related to healthcare and Parkinson's in particular."

Make it brief: the who, what, and why. You are getting your foot in the door, so to speak.

Then have a set story to go to that you know down pat. "I always thought that I would be able to work until retirement and then travel the country to see my relatives, but now I spend my time wrangling with the symptoms of the disease." Now you've tugged the heartstrings. This will make it a meaningful interaction for them. If they don't have time to pursue a conversation with you, ask them for their health staffer's name and say I will follow up with them. Make them know you will act.

What to have ready for an office visit:

You can call their national or local office and ask when they will have 'local office hours' and you want to schedule a visit. Once that is set, do your homework. Know precisely why you are going and why it matters to you. Make it personal but don't overwhelm yourself.

I created a binder called The National Plan to End Parkinson's. You don't have to create something extravagant, but you must leave something behind with who you are, why you visited, why it matters, and what action they can take. I included general information about Parkinson's Disease and local statistics for my area. A copy or a summary of the bill. I highlighted the areas that were the most important to me. For The National Plan to End Parkinson's, this was the details of who was going to be on the committee and that half would be from our community. I included national statistics on the increasing onset of PD and that patients were getting younger. I included the financial impact of PD. I listed the co-sponsors of the bill and stressed that the cost is negligent, and the support is bipartisan. I included information about the companion bill in the Senate. I included a template for a proclamation. I stated that we were having a walk during Parkinson's Awareness Month and that we would share the proclamation with the attendees. I invited them to attend. I included my personal information, and my roles in the PD community and offered to assist them in any manner they may need (this resulted in my being invited to a healthcare roundtable discussion).

Above all, KEEP YOUR PERSONAL POLITICS OUT OF IT. You are representing the Parkinson's Community. You don't want to leave them with opinions on things outside of what you are visiting them for. If you have another issue you wish to discuss, address it at a different time.

Coming soon: Telephone and Writing scripts