



# Advocacy Tool Kit

Vol. III

*Effortless but Effective Advocacy:  
Building Relationships with Elected Officials*



## In This Volume

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We hope that by now, the first two volumes in this tool kit have shown you all the quick and easy ways that you can advocate on hunger issues at a systemic level while doing the direct advocacy you already do with your work at a food bank or meal program. In this volume, we'll talk about ways that you can continue to build on your systemic advocacy efforts while laying the groundwork to strengthen and enhance your program—by building relationships with your elected officials.

Lobbying has a bad reputation. We don't like the idea of "special interests" or the idea that policy changes which impact all of us can be influenced for better or for worse by a handshake deal under the table. But lobbying is a powerful and effective tool that is used to create strong public policies that protect our communities' most vulnerable people when done the way it's supposed to be done—in the full view of the public and supported by the principles of democracy.

Lobbying is effective when elected officials know you and see you as a trusted source of information and expertise. Building that relationship, even talking with an elected official, may seem intimidating, but just keep this one thought in mind: you are an expert. Our state legislators only wear their legislator caps part-time. They are retired or have full-time jobs as business owners, farmers, sometimes even medical professionals, but they are not emergency food providers. They do not have the knowledge and experiences that you have fighting hunger on the front lines every day, but they are asked to make important decisions which affect food insecure families. They need and, in fact, want to hear from you.

In this volume, we'll give you information and ideas for things you can do to establish and strengthen your relationship with people who represent you in Olympia and in Congress. Establishing a relationship takes leg work and requires you to push your comfort level, but once you get to know your elected officials, maintaining the relationship is easy and benefits your program and the people you serve on so many levels: your elected official may join your Board or help with fundraising efforts, they'll take your calls or make appointments with you so you can talk about the issues in your community, and based on your information, they will hopefully cast their votes to support hunger programs and our public safety net. We hope you'll see the benefits of lobbying for yourself and hope you'll find these tools useful to your work as an anti-hunger advocate.

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# NONPROFITS CAN LOBBY! Frequently Asked Questions

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## What is lobbying?

Lobbying is any communication with elected officials or their staff to influence specific, pending legislation.

## How is lobbying different from educating elected officials?

If you talk to your State Senator about hunger and the role that food has in everyday life, that is educating public officials. Your actions become lobbying when you then ask the State Senator to vote for or against a specific piece of legislation.

*Lobbying comes in two forms: DIRECT and GRASS ROOTS. What's the difference? It depends on the audience for your communications.*

## What is DIRECT Lobbying?

- communicating your views on pending legislation to an ELECTED OFFICIAL or STAFF MEMBER;
- asking your group's MEMBERS to contact elected officials about legislation, or
- asking the VOTING PUBLIC to support/oppose ballot INITIATIVES and REFERENDA (In this case the voting public are the "elected officials" casting the vote for or against legislation.)

## What is GRASSROOTS Lobbying?

- Communications to the GENERAL PUBLIC that do the following:
  - refers to specific legislation;
  - reflects a view or position on that legislation; and
  - encourages readers/listeners to communicate with their elected officials with an ask that the official take action on that legislation.

## Where do I find the rules governing lobbying for nonprofits in the U.S. Tax Code?

You can find the rules that govern lobbying by nonprofits on the IRS website, where you find other rules about what your organization can and cannot do as a registered nonprofit—Section 501(c)(3). <http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Lobbying>

## How can you determine whether your lobbying activities are substantial enough to risk losing your nonprofit status?

According to section 501(c)(3), lobbying or attempting to influence legislation cannot be a "substantial" part of a nonprofit organization's activities.

## NONPROFITS CAN LOBBY! (cont.)

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But how does one determine how much of a charity's activities are "substantial?" One answer is by using the "Expenditure Test" that calculates and reports an organization's lobbying expenses. This is done by completing the one page form—IRS Form 5768. The Expenditure Test sets clear **dollar limits on lobbying expenses**:

- 20% of budget up to first \$500,000 on DIRECT lobbying
- 25% *of that amount* (not of what you spend, but of what you are allowed to spend) can be spent on INDIRECT, or GRASS ROOTS lobbying.

So, if your budget is \$500,000 you can spend \$100,000 on DIRECT Lobbying, you can spend \$ 25,000 on GRASS ROOTS lobbying. You have to keep clear records, but you have to do that anyway as a nonprofit.

But note—completing this form is not required. Nonprofits that lobby are encouraged to complete the form to help ensure that they are well within the tax code rules on lobbying.

### What are the penalties for violating the 501(c)(3) rules on lobbying?

If your organization does not complete IRS Form 5768 <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f5768.pdf> and your organization is found to be spending a substantial amount of time and money on lobbying, you could lose your nonprofit status.

If your organization uses the Expenditure Test described above, the penalties for violating are less severe. In most cases, you would pay a fine on the amount spent over the dollar limit on lobbying but you would not lose your nonprofit status.

*Let's be clear though: even an organization like Northwest Harvest that has a full-time staff person dedicated to lobbying and grassroots advocacy will never reach the expenditure limits on a nonprofit's ability to lobby, so it's doubtful that you will ever risk running afoul of the law on this point!*

### What activities are exempt, that is, do not count as lobbying?

Major categories of exempt activities include the following:

- **Non-partisan Research/Analysis**
- **Membership communication** (magazines, newsletters, conferences) is exempt unless it "directly encourages" members to lobby.
- **Examination of broad social problems** doesn't count—even if it requires legislation.
- **Testimony, technical assistance, and other responses to requests for information** from a legislative body (e.g., a committee of Congress)
- **"Self Defense" activity in which you take a position on legislation to help your organization survive**—e.g., to fight attempts to end nonprofit status or fight harmful tax policies.
- **At the federal level**, contacts with federal agencies to **influence regulation-making**.

## NONPROFITS CAN LOBBY! (cont.)

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### Other than expenditures, what are the other limitations on lobbying by nonprofits?

- Nonprofits cannot use FEDERAL FUNDS to lobby; however, an organization that receives or is entirely funded by federal funds can still lobby, provided that the expenses are paid for with funds raised from private sources (e.g., grants from private foundations or funds raised from a special event.)
- Nonprofits cannot lobby using RESTRICTED FUNDS. The grant agreement from a funder will tell you whether you can use money from that grant for lobbying. Lobbying expenses can always be paid for by another grant with unrestricted funds.
- Nonprofits cannot engage in PARTISAN POLITICAL ACTIVITY. A registered 501(c)(3) organization cannot give money to or work for the election of candidates for elective office nor can it urge its members to do so.

### What other laws or restrictions govern lobbying activities by nonprofits?

**NOTE:** *Washington State differs from federal law in some respects:*

- It only applies to state level laws and policies
- Unlike federal law, contacts to influence the rules and regulations made by state agencies is considered to be lobbying.
- Communications to your own members is not considered lobbying
- Grassroots lobbying is still lobbying if you provide information on your organization's position on an issue or legislation even if you do not ask your audience to take action.
- Additional rules, regulations, and information about whether the time you spend on contacting elected officials is substantial enough that you need to register as a lobbyist may be found on the website for the Washington Office of Public Disclosure: <http://www.pdc.wa.gov/>



*Adapted from document created by Nancy Amidei for the Civic Engagement Project.*

# Participation in a Lobby Day

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If the thought of talking with your elected representatives sounds intimidating to you, try signing up for a coalition's lobby day, such as the Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition's Hunger Action Day <http://www.wsahnc.org/annual-lobby-day/#.UzBXT6Pn-1s>

A lobby day is coordinated by a coalition or an organization dedicated to advocacy. Participants are constituents, such as yourself, and usually have little or no experience with lobbying. They join the lobby day effort because they are passionate about the issue and want to make themselves heard. At a lobby day, you'll get to talk and network with other participants and go as a group to visit the people who represent your district. There's strength (and comfort) in numbers.

The lobby day organizers will provide you with everything you need to have a successful visit with your representative. There are usually workshops that explain how to talk with your representative and provide you with background information on the issues you'll discuss. They'll also provide you with the materials that you'll leave behind after your visit, such as one page fact sheets or a note or gift with which you can thank your representative for the visit. All you need to do is set aside the time to go and participate!

You can maximize the benefits for your organization by bringing people with you to a lobby day. Staff, volunteers, and especially customers can join you since they all, like you, have direct experiences and expertise to share. The following page contains an outline of steps you can take to organize a delegation from your program to attend Hunger Action Day in Olympia.





# Outline for Planning Your Organization’s Participation in Hunger Action Day

When	Action
Now!	Become a member of the Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition to receive periodic updates on state and federal issues and get notices on when to register for Hunger Action Day.
November-December	<p>You may receive a Save the Date from AHNC as Hunger Action Day which has historically been held in February. When you get that Save the Date, do the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mark the date on your calendar</li> <li>• Print out and post the Save the Date flyer in your volunteer break room and in a place where your customers will see it</li> <li>• Include the information in your program’s newsletters, social media pages, and other communications to volunteers, staff, and community</li> <li>• Forward the electronic version of the flyer to your networks.</li> </ul>
December-January	<p>When you get a notice that registration for Hunger Action Day is open, sign up as soon as you can. <i>This gives AHNC more time to work on securing an appointment with your legislators.</i> Find out who else from your program wants and can go and make sure that they sign up or register for them when you sign up.</p>
One month before Hunger Action Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure transportation to Olympia. It may be easier for customers or volunteers to join you if you can help coordinate carpools or rent a van. Northwest Harvest may be able to provide gas cards to programs that bring at least one client, volunteer or Board member to Hunger Action Day. Email us at <a href="mailto:partners@northwestharvest.org">partners@northwestharvest.org</a> for more information.</li> <li>• Plan activities for children who are coming with your party. This could be as easy as getting coloring books and crayons, but consider activities that help children convey their experiences with hunger such as asking them to write about how it feels to be hungry.</li> </ul>
Day before Hunger Action Day	<p>Pack a box with the materials you need including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Light snacks for the ride to and from Olympia</li> <li>• Children’s activities items if applicable</li> <li>• A copy of a newsletter or brochure from your program for each of your legislative visits to leave with your representatives</li> <li>• Your business card with your contact information</li> </ul>
Hunger Action Day	Advocate and have fun!

# Meeting With Your Elected Officials

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Personal visits are a highly effective way of helping elected officials understand your position or program. Elected officials welcome visits from constituents because your representative needs your expertise to help them make decisions on issues. Ultimately, they also need your vote to stay in office.

**REMEMBER:** *Your expertise comes from what you know and the stories you hear while working on the frontlines of hunger relief. You don't need statistics or intricate knowledge of fiscal policy to have the ear of your representatives—all you need to do is speak from the heart.*

## Request and Schedule the Meeting

- To request a meeting with your state legislators, email or call their legislative aides.
  - Find your legislators by visiting <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/DistrictFinder/Default.aspx>
  - Find the names of your legislators' aides at this site: <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/rosters/MembersLegislativeAssistants.aspx>
- To request a meeting with a member of our Congressional delegation, call their office and ask to speak with the scheduler. You can also visit the member's website which may provide information on the best way to request a visit, including providing an online form that you can complete so that the scheduler may email or call you directly. To find the website for your member, visit <http://www.house.gov>.

### Tips:

- Schedule visits with elected officials when they are back at home in their districts—usually summer through early fall.
- If you want to schedule a visit with a state legislator during the winter, you will likely have to schedule the appointment at their office at the Capitol in Olympia.
- You don't have to go to D.C. to meet with your Representative or our Senators. Some travel home regularly so you can talk with the scheduler in the district office to find a time that may work for both of you.
- If you can be flexible with your schedule, you may have an easier time securing an appointment.
- If you can't get an appointment with the elected official, schedule an appointment with his or her staff. Legislative aides are very helpful, take diligent notes from the meeting, and will give all of that information to the elected official.

## Before the Meeting

It seems obvious, but preparation is key!

- Research where your representative stands on the issue or on the legislation. You can find out that information by scanning your local newspaper or by visiting the representative's website.
- Prepare your pitch on the issue or legislation by finding statistics and a client story that illustrate your point.
- Print out a fact sheet and your program's brochure or newsletter as materials to leave behind with your member after your appointment.

## Meeting With Your Elected Officials (cont.)

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### Tips:

- You can usually find all the information you need about your issue or legislation from an organization with staff dedicated to advocacy such as Northwest Harvest or from a coalition like the Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition. This includes one page fact sheets so you don't have to design your own!
- Be sure to bring several copies of your leave behind materials, enough to leave with the elected official and any staff who sit in on the meeting.

### At the Meeting

So what happens at a meeting? Here's how it usually works:

- When you arrive for your appointment, introduce yourself to the legislative aide or person at the office front desk. State your name, who you represent, and your appointment time. You'll be greeted and shown a place where you can wait.
- When you are shown into the elected official's office, shake their hand and introduce yourself again. Be sure to say your name, your title, who you represent, *whether you live in that elected official's district*, and the number of people your program serves.
- Sometimes the elected official's staff may sit in on the meeting to take notes or in the case of Congressional members, the legislative aide may be the member's policy staff on your issue. The staff person may have additional questions or may be able to help you explain your issue.
- You'll usually have no more than 15 minutes for your appointment so be prepared to quickly present your issue. Spend no more than 10 minutes presenting your issue so that you leave time for questions. You'll want to say:
  - The issue or legislation about which you are meeting today.
  - A quick description of the problem, and include 1 or 2 statistics to illustrate the need.
  - Spend the bulk of your remaining time telling a story that illustrates the problem and how the proposed solution can help. It's especially good if you can tell a client story because the client is likely a constituent.
  - Wrap up your presentation with a sentence or two about your program and how you help but how what's additionally needed is support in the form of the program or legislation for which you are advocating.
- Your elected official may have some questions for you. If you don't know the answer; just tell them that you don't know but will find out-and be sure to follow up later with the answer.

## Meeting With Your Elected Officials (cont.)

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- Wrap up your meeting by making “the ask”: Ask your elected official how they stand on the issue or legislation.
- Offer your legislator whether there is anything you can do to help them as they fight for or against the issue, depending on what your position is.
- Leave the meeting making sure to leave behind a one page fact sheet on the issue, your card, a brochure or newsletter on your program, and thanking the member for his or her time.

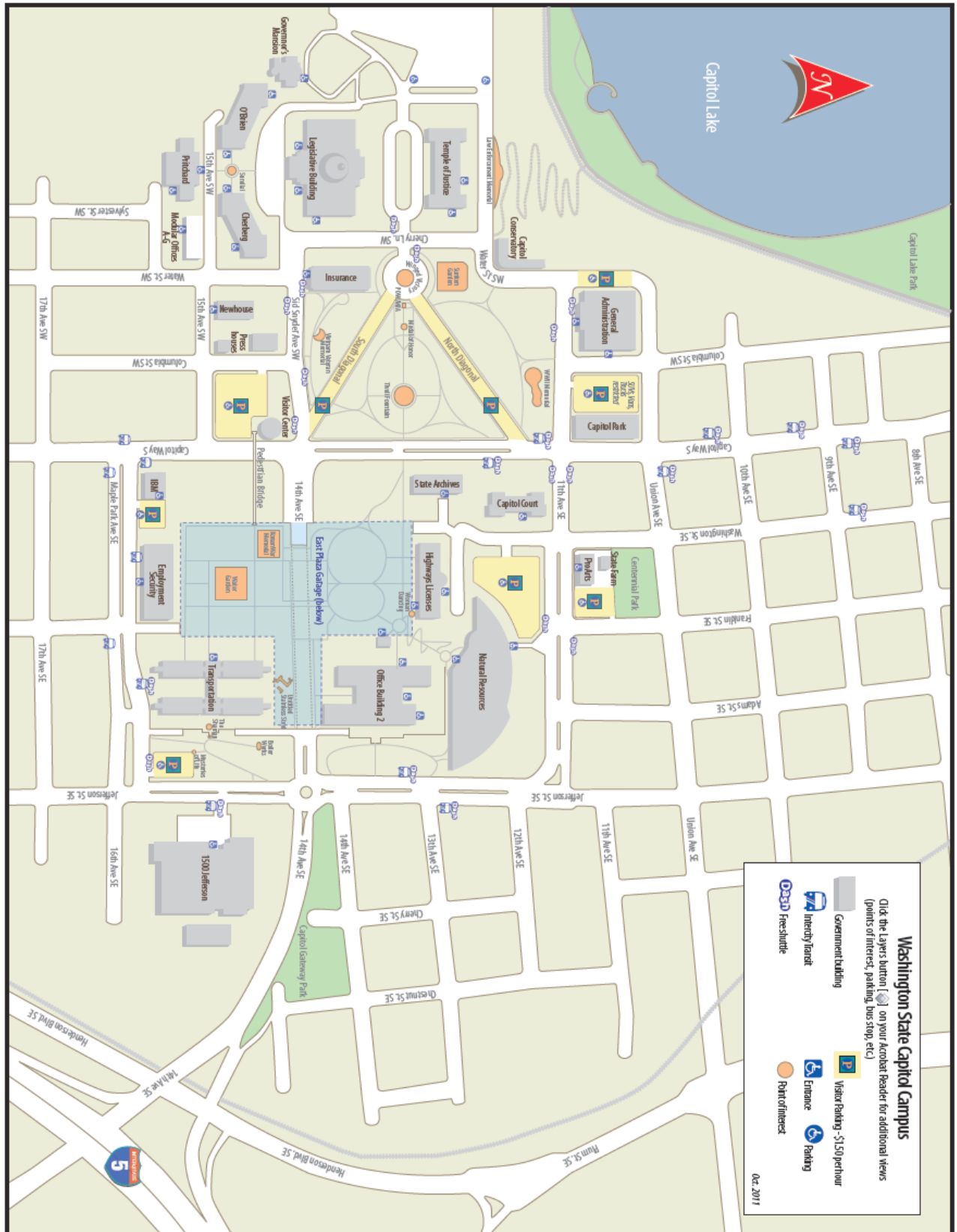
### Tips

- You do not have to wear a suit, but do dress comfortably and neatly.
- Be flexible about time. Show up on time, but be prepared to either wait or get called in early as your representative’s schedule may change at the last minute.
- Sometimes business or another appointment may mean that your representative can’t meet with you, and you will be offered the opportunity to keep your appointment by meeting with a staff person. Take the opportunity as it is just as important to build a relationship with staff as it is with your representative.
- If you end up meeting with a staff person but your representative is in his or her office, ask if you can say hello and introduce yourself as you leave. It won’t take up much time and this way, you at least get some face time with your member.
- Do not be surprised if your elected official does not know about your issue or program. Elected officials have to know about many issues and may specialize in areas unrelated to your work. Avoid overwhelming the elected official with information and detail.
- Refer to your printed materials while talking but try not to give them the papers until you are done talking. This way, the elected official and staff person must concentrate on you and your speech instead of reading through your materials.

### After the Meeting

- Follow up the meeting with a thank you note, thanking the elected official for his/her or her time. Be sure to re-state your position in this note.
- If the elected official asks for more information, please get this information to them. If you need help responding to questions, call Northwest Harvest or email us [partners@northwestharvest.org](mailto:partners@northwestharvest.org).

# Washington State Capitol Campus



# Arranging a Site Visit

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Arranging for your elected officials to spend time at your food bank or meal program is a fantastic way to engage them in the fight against hunger. The effect of seeing how hunger is affecting your community in person will stay on your elected official's mind more than any other method of advocating. The procedure in arranging a site visit is similar to arranging a meeting:

## Request and Schedule the Meeting

- Schedule a meeting when the state legislature or Congress is in recess. See our calendar in Volume One for a list of general times when elected officials are in district, but summer, particularly the month of August, is when both state and federal legislators are back at home.
- Be prepared for delays or cancellations.
- Send in as much information about your program to their office as possible so they can learn about your program. Try to include the following, if available:
  - Latest newsletter
  - Program brochure
  - Most recent annual report
  - Press clippings about events, any special or new services you are offering, or articles about your program that state the current level of need
  - Include a cover letter that explains the materials included and highlights what they may find. Be sure to provide a link to your website if you have one for more information.
- To request a meeting with a member of our Congressional delegation, call their office and ask to speak with the scheduler. You can also visit the member's website which may provide information on the best way to request a visit, including providing an online form that you can complete so that the scheduler may email or call you directly. To find the website for your member, visit <http://www.house.gov>.

## At the Meeting

- Give notice to your staff and volunteers for the day that an elected official will be coming to visit. Ask for questions that they want asked; be sure to review proper etiquette.
- Once they arrive, give a tour of your program just like you would give a tour to anyone else. Introduce your elected official to volunteers, clients and coworkers.

## Arranging a Site Visit (cont.)

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- The representatives are at your program, so don't give them 'special' treatment. Be polite and professional, but remember that they want to see what really goes on in front and behind the scenes – so try your best not to change anything.
- Arrange a sit-down in your office and explain what you would like to discuss, what questions you have, and why you invited them to come on a site visit. Offer time to answer their questions as well.
- If your representative has visited your program in the past, give them a new experience to gain their interest in visiting again: have them work your food distribution line, host a coffee talk with customers, or bring in community partners who can help illustrate how you work together to fight hunger in your community.

### Before They Leave the Meeting

It seems obvious, but preparation is key!

- Try to find out what effect the site visit had on your elected official.
- Give a one-page fact sheet summarizing your legislative issue and request for action.
- Once again, utilize this opportunity to give your elected official any materials about your program. The more times you give them an information packet on your program, the higher chances they'll read them.

### After the Meeting

- Follow-up with a thank you note thanking your elected official for their time. Be sure to restate your position on the issues you discussed.
- If the elected official asked for more information about your program/issue, be sure to get that information to them.

## Sample Site Visit Invitation Letter

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Dear (Elected Official Title and Last Name)

Thank you for your public service to our community. On behalf of (NAME OF PROGRAM), I would like to invite you to visit our program. This would be an excellent opportunity for you to meet with and talk with your constituents who struggle with hunger, hear about our local efforts to help our neighbors in need, and to learn more about what government programs and services you can support that will help us in our fight to end hunger.

I would like for us to have enough time to give you a tour of our program, talk with our volunteers and clients, and still have some time to answer any questions you may have. I anticipate that a visit with us would take no more than an hour of your time. Our service days are (DAYS AND HOURS OF SERVICE). Please contact me at your earliest convenience as to when a visit may fit on your schedule. I will also follow up with your scheduler next week if I do not hear from you by then.

I am including a copy of our most recent newsletter and my business card. I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,



## Sample Thank You Letter

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Dear (NAME OF ELECTED OFFICIAL):

On behalf of the staff, volunteers, and clients of (NAME OF PROGRAM), we thank you for taking the time to visit our program. We enjoyed the opportunity to show you how hard we are working to provide food to hungry families in our community and know that you will now do your part to help us in our fight to end hunger by supporting (NAME OF LEGISLATION OR FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM). Public policy and private actions go hand in hand in helping put food on the tables of your constituents in need.

As always, I am available to answer any questions you may have and look forward to continuing our conversations about hunger in our community. Please do not hesitate to contact me if we can be of any assistance to you.

Sincerely,

# Food Stamp Challenge

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Each year when Northwest Harvest conducts our annual focus groups with clients at food banks, we always hear at least one participant say that our elected officials need to step into their shoes and experience what it is like to get by with limited means to cover all household necessities. The Food Stamp Challenge is one way to provide that opportunity.

The Food Stamp Challenge asks participants to spend at least a week living on a food budget that is limited to the average amount that a household of similar size receives in food stamp assistance. Participants are asked to blog about their experiences to help educate the public on everything from the realities of trying to eat a healthy diet on such limited means to recipes crafted from the foods purchased. A Food Stamp Challenge should also include a piece in the local media to help draw attention to the blog and provide some statistics about hunger to provide more education to the general public.

Because the Food Stamp Challenge is used to raise public awareness about hunger, anyone can participate—volunteers, staff, donors, Board members, and local celebrities; however, you can increase the impact of a successful Food Stamp Challenge by engaging your elected officials to participate. In this way, they spend some time doing this experiential exercise, providing them an education and a context in which they can consider the decisions they make when they vote on budget spending for nutrition assistance programs.

The following materials provide everything you need to run a Food Stamp Challenge and include:

- A registration form for participating in the Food Stamp Challenge
- A list of blog prompts to help your participants write about their experiences
- A press release template

For an example of a Food Stamp Challenge blog, visit <http://acaachallenge.wordpress.com/> (sponsored by Arizona Community Action Association).



# Food Stamp Challenge Registration Form

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*Adapted from the Food Research Action Center:*

[http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/fsc\\_toolkit.pdf](http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/fsc_toolkit.pdf)

Here in Washington, the Basic Food program (food stamps) helps over 1 million low-income people purchase food for themselves and their families. The program is designed as a safety net to help ensure people have access to food during difficult times.

Who uses food stamps? Half of all homes that use food stamps have at least one young child. Another 9% are aged 60 or older. The average food stamp recipient spends 10 months on the program, showing that food stamps do what they are supposed to be doing: provide temporary assistance for those who need help meeting the most basic of needs.

You have the opportunity to take the Food Stamp Challenge in order to better understand how the program is working on a personal level. For one week, starting \_\_\_\_\_ (start date), participants in the challenge will live on the statewide average benefit: \$4.20 per day<sup>1</sup>.

You, your family, and your staff are encouraged to join the Challenge and share your experiences of a week on a food stamp diet.

## Participation Guidelines

1. Each person should spend no more than \$31.50 on food and beverages during the week.
2. All food purchased and eaten during the Challenge week, including fast food and dining out, must be included in the total spending.
3. During the Challenge, only eat food that you purchase for the project. Do not eat food that you already own (this does not include spices and condiments).
4. Avoid accepting free food from friends, family, or at work, including at receptions or briefings.
5. Please keep track of receipts on food spending and take note of your experiences throughout the week. An online blog will be available where you can post your progress and findings throughout the Challenge week.
6. If at any time you find that your health is compromised by your diet, STOP THE CHALLENGE IMMEDIATELY.

**Note:** You may find it difficult to complete the Challenge due to schedule or the limited budget. It will still be important and worthwhile to track your experiences.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, register for the Food Stamp Challenge and will live on an average food stamp budget from \_\_\_\_\_ (list start and end dates here).

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

Please sign and return this to:

(Your program's information here)

\_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> This amount is subject to change. Be sure to adjust this amount if necessary based on information that is most recent to when you conduct your Food Stamp Challenge.

# Food Stamp Challenge Blogging Prompts and Tips

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*Adapted from the Arizona Community Action Association:*

<http://arizonasnapexperience.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/blogging-prompts-and-tips-2012.pdf>

Thank you for taking this important challenge to learn more about the experience of living on a food stamp budget. Please share your experiences on our blog and consider the following when writing your posts:

## REFLECT ON FOOD SHOPPING

- How did your shopping experience on a food stamp budget compare to a typical food shopping experience for your family?
- Did you shop at your normal grocery store? How far did you travel to get there? How much did it cost you in gas? If you didn't or don't have a car, what would be the route you would have to take by public transportation?
- Were you surprised by the prices of any foods you bought/chose not to buy?
- Did you take advantage of sales/coupons?
- What are some favorite foods you had to leave off your shopping list this week?

## REFLECT ON FOOD PREPARATION

- How has your food preparation this week differed from typical food prep for your family?
- Do you take more or less time preparing meals? Conventional cooking or microwave?
- Are your meals simpler or more complex than the meals you would typically prepare?
  - Share a photo of a meal you prepared!
  - Share a successful recipe!

## REFLECT ON STICKING TO THE BUDGET

- How have food temptations this week differed from a typical week?
- In what situations do you find sticking to the food stamp budget difficult?
- Have you been able to eat out this week? If so, how did this affect your food budget?
- Have you found any creative ways to stick to your food stamp budget?
  - Share strategies for coping with food temptations!

## REFLECT ON THE REALITY FOR FOOD STAMP USERS

- How has participating in the Food Stamp Challenge supported or challenged your perceptions of food stamp participants in your community?
- What are some challenges faced by low-budget shoppers in your area?
- What are some additional challenges to low-budget shoppers looking to buy healthy foods in your area?
- What are some important differences between participating in the week-long Challenge and living on food stamp budget in the longer term?

## REFLECT ON YOUR EXPERIENCE

- Think about how much you were budgeted- was this enough? Why or why not?
- What have you learned through participation in the Food Stamp Challenge?
- What surprised you most during your experience?
- If you had to spend another week on a food stamp budget, what would you do differently?

# Food Stamp Challenge Press Release

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*Adapted from the Food Research Action Center:*

[http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/fsc\\_toolkit.pdf](http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/fsc_toolkit.pdf)

(Print on Letterhead)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
(DATE)

Contact: (NAME)  
(NUMBER, EMAIL)

## **REP./SEN. [NAME] (AND FAMILY) TO LIVE ON FOOD STAMP BUDGET**

*Legislator to Live on \$31.50 Worth of Food for One Week*

Rep./ Sen. [NAME(S)] (Party-District) today pledged to live on only \$4.20 worth of food a day—the average Basic Food or food stamp benefit level here in Washington—the week of [DATE]. The purpose is to raise awareness of how difficult it is to purchase a healthy and nutritious diet on a food stamp budget.

“By living on an average food stamp budget for a week we won’t come close to knowing the worry and anxiety that millions of low-income people feel every day when they’re not sure where their next meal is coming from, but we do hope to shine a light on the importance of the program and the need for increased benefits,” said Rep./Sen. [NAME].

Established in 1939, the Food Stamp Program helps more than 1 million low-income Washingtonians purchase needed food each month. Eligibility is based on income and assets depending on household size.

Eligibility in Basic Food also includes work requirements, with all non-elderly adults required to be employed or to register for employment. Many are also required to participate in work training and job search programs.

“We believe we have a moral responsibility to end hunger in Washington,” Rep./Sen. [NAME] said. “Basic Food plays a vital role in providing nutrition assistance to low-income families, but the current benefit level makes it very difficult for many recipients to make ends meet.”

*[Include information about your shopping trips for food in your community, possibly with a local food stamp advocate or recipient].*

The Food Stamp Program encourages people to transition from welfare to work by supplementing their food budgets and gradually decreasing benefits as income increases. Almost 30 percent of food stamp households have at least some earnings, and half of all new food stamp participants will leave the program within ten months. Of all food stamp households, 84 percent contained either an elderly or disabled person or a child, and these households received 89 percent of all benefits.

In addition to helping families make ends meet, the Food Stamp Program also gives back to a state’s economy. For every \$5 in food stamps that are used in grocery stores or at local farmer’s markets, close to \$9 is generated in local economic activity.

“Food stamps are used in grocery stores and farmer’s markets throughout our state, with those dollars going back into the local community. It’s a program that’s good for our families and good for our state,” Rep./Sen. [NAME] said.

A blog that Food Stamp Challenge participants can use to describe their experiences while living on the food stamp diet has been created at [\(website address\)](#).

# Hosting a Candidates Forum

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## Introduction

A candidate forum isn't a debate; it is a moderated forum in which candidates who are running for all the local, state, and federal offices that represent your community can come together and share their viewpoints on an issue.

There are many reasons why you should consider hosting a candidate forum:

1. You can educate decision makers before they take office—think about how much more effective an elected official can be in protecting programs that feed hungry families if they know about good ideas for public policy on day one of their term!
2. You can get to know incumbents and new representatives, and more importantly, they get to know you and your program. Once elected, you may have more open lines of communication with these politicians because you provided them a forum in which they could state their position on issues that are important to you and the clients we serve.
3. Without an effort by people who care about hunger and poverty, we may not see frank and well-publicized discussions about the issues that affect our clients and our efforts to help them. Political ads and debates may skirt around the issue of poverty by talking about our stalled economy and people's plans to end unemployment, but they don't talk about the value of services that help low-income people and ideas that could help end poverty, not just the symptoms of it. A candidate forum that focuses on human services and our safety net would fill in that void in our political discourse.
4. A candidate forum doesn't just educate politicians; it educates the public that attends the event. Questions for candidates help the general public in attendance understand what you're seeing every day in your work on the front lines of hunger. They will then not only cast educated votes in support of the candidates who can offer the best solutions to ending hunger and poverty, but they may also have a better understanding of how they can help your program in more immediate ways such as donations or volunteering.

In the following pages, we provide some tools to organizing a candidate forum, including a checklist, a sample invitation letter to candidates, a sample press release, and a sample thank you letter. If this sounds like a big investment of time, you can follow the lead of one of our partner programs, the Bellingham Food Bank, and work with other human services agencies in your community such as senior centers, community health clinics, and Head Start programs, to put together a forum on human services and the safety net. The work and cost would then be spread out across all of your partner agencies.

The following materials were all adapted from the Aging Services of Minnesota's Legislative Forum Toolkit available at <http://www.agingservicesmn.org/assets/docs/GuideHoldingCandidateForum.pdf>

## Hosting a Candidates Forum (cont.)

### Forum Checklist

Due By	√	Activity and description
12 weeks before event		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Choose your location, considering affordable community spaces such as public libraries, community centers, or local colleges.</li> <li>Select your time and day for your event—aim for early evening on a weeknight.</li> <li>Choose your moderator, selecting someone who is nonpartisan, lively, but engaged in your issues. College professors, local media personalities, or community leaders are good to consider.</li> </ul>
10 weeks before event		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Send invitation letter to candidates, introducing yourself, the issues of interest (including hunger), and express your interest that they participate in your candidate forum. Be sure to invite all candidates running for the same office and the major offices that represent your community that are having elections this year (e.g., mayor, city council, state senator and representatives, Congressional representatives.) See template.</li> </ul>
6-8 weeks before event		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Call candidates to confirm their receipt of your letter and their participation in the forum.</li> <li>Arrange logistics to draw attendance to the event such as food, child care and translators</li> <li>Confirm your location and moderator.</li> <li>Develop an agenda for the evening, including welcome and introductions, opening statements by candidates, questions from the moderator, and Q&amp;A from audience.</li> </ul>
One month before event		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Send a packet to each of the candidates who have confirmed their participation including the agenda, a list of who to contact if there are questions, and the event details.</li> </ul>
2-3 weeks before event		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Publicize event to public: use your network of staff, volunteers, donors, and Board to get word out to their networks about the event.</li> <li>Send press release to local media</li> <li>Post flyers in community spaces (e.g., library, parks, community centers, etc.)</li> <li>Finalize arrangements for refreshments and support services for event.</li> <li>Schedule volunteers to help with greeting audience, candidates, sign-in table and other logistics.</li> </ul>

## Hosting a Candidates Forum (cont.)

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Due By	√	Activity and description
One week before event		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Follow up personally with any candidates who have not confirmed their attendance.</li><li>• Check in with those who have confirmed their attendance to see if there is anything they need.</li></ul>
Day before		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Check in with candidates on any changes to the agenda and other last minute details</li><li>• Review the program with the moderator</li><li>• Follow up with local media about press coverage.</li></ul>
After forum		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Send thank you letters to moderator and to candidates</li><li>• Keep up the discussion of the issues raised at your forum with a Letter to the Editor of your local papers</li><li>• Write a summary of the forum for your newsletter or agency blog.</li></ul>





# Sample Invitation Letter

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Date

Candidate Name

Address

City, State, Zip Code

Dear:

On behalf of (NAME OF PROGRAM OR YOUR FORUM PLANNING COMMITTEE), I wish to invite you to participate in our candidate forum on (DATE, START AND END TIMES) at (LOCATION).

Unlike other candidate forums, this event will focus on poverty with an emphasis on hunger. We want to hear your vision on how to end hunger in our community and how you would help accomplish that given ongoing budget constraints, partisan gridlock, and cuts to our safety net. We are inviting all major party candidates for the offices that represent our community at the local, state and federal level. Our forum will be moderated by (NAME OF MODERATOR AND PROFESSIONAL TITLE).

In the coming weeks, I will contact you with additional details about this event, but please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

On behalf of (NAME OF PROGRAM OR FORUM PLANNING COMMITTEE), I look forward to hearing from you and hope you will be able to join us!

Sincerely,

# Sample Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
(DATE)

Contact: (NAME)  
(NUMBER, EMAIL)

## **FOOD BANK TO HOLD CANDIDATE FORUM**

*Candidates for local, state, and federal offices will address issues related to hunger and poverty*

(NAME OF PROGRAM OR FORUM PLANNING COMMITTEE) will hold a candidate forum on (DATE AND START AND END TIMES). The forum, unique from other candidate events, will focus on hunger and poverty issues.

(CANDIDATES PARTICIPATING) will present their visions for ending hunger in our community given the challenges posed by our slowly recovering economy and partisan gridlock over budget and revenue. Candidates will also take questions from audience members.

The forum will be moderated by (NAME OF MODERATOR AND PROFESSIONAL TITLE; BRIEF 1-2 SENTENCE BIO OF MODERATOR).

All members of the public are invited to attend to learn about hunger in our community and to hear from those who hope to represent our interests in ending hunger and poverty by taking elected office.

The event will take place at (LOCATION ADDRESS AND ROOM).

# Sample Thank You Letter

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Candidate Name

Address

City, State, Zip Code

Dear:

Thank you for participating in our candidate forum on hunger and poverty. We appreciated hearing your concerns and ideas for ending hunger in our community.

(NAME OF PROGRAM) provides a vital service to hungry families, providing food to (LATEST STATISTIC ABOUT NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS OR VISITS SEEN EACH MONTH). By participating in our forum, you showed the families we serve that you care about the barriers they face to accessing affordable, nutritious food. You showed an interest in helping families meet their most basic of needs—hunger—and we appreciate your advocacy and interest!

Please know that I am happy to answer any questions you may have at any time in the future regarding hunger and poverty in our town and provide you any information you may need to help feed our neighbors in need.

Sincerely,

**For more information, contact:**

**Northwest Harvest**  
800.722.6924  
[info@northwestharvest.org](mailto:info@northwestharvest.org)

PO Box 12272 Seattle 98102  
22220 W Valley Hwy Kent 98032  
3808 N Sullivan Rd #15-K Spokane 99216  
911 S 3rd St Yakima 98901  
800.722.6924

**Discover more at**  
[northwestharvest.org](http://northwestharvest.org)



**HUNGER  
STOPS HERE.**

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