

# IN-DISTRICT ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

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**October  
2019**

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# Introduction

## In-District Advocacy is Critical to Drive Change

Building and maintaining strong relationships with Members of Congress is essential to achieving your advocacy goals. For this reason, engaging with Senators, Representatives, and their staff, should be a top priority for advocates. Many advocates, however, worry that their inability to travel to Washington, D.C. frequently, if at all, minimizes their impact on federal advocacy. This fear, in fact, could not be further from the truth.

Federal advocacy starts at home, where Senators and Representatives are elected by their constituents. They represent you, and your voice is what is most important to them. Engaging with Members of Congress in-district is not only more feasible logistically for most advocates, but also provides valuable opportunities to build meaningful relationships with Members and their staff.

Members of Congress are also in-district quite frequently. This year in particular offers ample opportunity for in-district advocacy. **There are district work periods built in throughout the Congressional calendar, and Members are usually in district between Friday and Monday every week.** There are many opportunities to participate in federal advocacy and engage with Senators and Representatives right in your own backyard. This toolkit shows you how to do just that.



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## Where to Begin?

This toolkit will be your guide. It will begin with the different ways you can engage with your Senator or Representative in-district followed by a step-by-step guide for how to meet with a Member of Congress, attend a town hall, plan a site visit, and write an editorial or letter to the editor. In this toolkit, you will find The Reconnecting Youth Campaign's advocacy priorities and briefing sheets to be used as leave-behinds for your Member. There are also helpful tips for effective advocacy throughout the toolkit.

We hope this toolkit provides a foundation for in-district federal advocacy and serves as a building block for strong and meaningful relationships with your Members of Congress.

# In-District Advocacy

## Building Relationships for Change



In 2017, the Reconnecting Youth Campaign launched, calling on Congress to invest in America's future by funding education, employment, training and national service opportunities for one million Opportunity Youth: young people ages 16- to 24 who are not in school and not working. Currently, programs supporting these opportunities such as AmeriCorps, Public Allies, the service and conservation corps, YouthBuild,

Job Corps, and the National Guard Youth Challenge reach about 360,000 young people each year. We launched this campaign during a difficult time in which the president's budget request to Congress proposed cutting billions of dollars from federal programs serving Opportunity Youth. In less than one year, the Reconnecting Youth Campaign not only helped prevent the proposed cuts, but also helped secure historic increases.

This year's goal is to secure enough federal funding to reconnect one million Opportunity Youth—young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school or the workforce—each year. First, increase funding for Opportunity Youth programs during this appropriations process. Secondly, help create a Congressional Opportunity Youth Caucus to champion the needs and contributions of Opportunity Youth.

## Advocacy Tip #1

Always be respectful while communicating your requests. This is the golden rule. Whether you are interacting with your Member of Congress in person, through a letter, or at an event, you want to leave the best impression on your Member and his or her staff. No one likes to deal with people who are rude.

Remember too, that being polite does not mean you cannot ask questions or discuss pressing issues with your Member. So long as you treat your Member with respect and courtesy, all topics are on the table, and your Member and his or her staff will be happy to maintain a relationship with you.



# How to Engage In-District

## Opportunities to Interact with Members of Congress

District work periods and Friday-Monday are the perfect time to interact with your Member of Congress and show your support for federal programs that fund juvenile justice programs and services. Whether you are a service provider, practitioner, police officer, clergy member, youth, student, family member, or community member, you are a constituent, and you have an important voice.

There are many ways that you can engage with your Members of Congress when they are in-district. Here are some examples:

- Schedule a meeting at the District Office;
- Attend a Town Hall meeting;
- Invite your Member for a site or program visit; or
- Write an editorial or letter to the editor.

## 2019 Dates to Remember

The following resources will help you prepare for your in-district outreach. Please keep the list of currently scheduled in-district work periods in mind as you plan your advocacy:

### House of Representatives

July 1-5 & 29-31

August 1-31

September 3-6 & 30

October 1-11

November 4-8 & 25-29

### Senate

July 1-5

August 5-31

September 1-6 & 30

October 1-14

November 25-29

December 16-31

# In-District Meetings

## Personal Visits With Your Member in the District

Members of Congress travel frequently between Washington, D.C. and their districts. Scheduling a meeting with them or one of their aides at the district office is a great way to make a connection with your Member.

Coordinating a meeting for a group of Opportunity Youth advocates is also an effective advocacy tool—the more constituents are concerned about an issue, the more likely the Member is to pay attention. See how to get started below.

## Make an Appointment

Contact the appointment scheduler in your district by fax or email. If you do not know your Senators or Representatives, you can use the zip-code finder here: [www.govtrack.us/congress/members](http://www.govtrack.us/congress/members). This site will provide you with a direct link to your Member's webpage, where you can find contact information for the district office. When you fax/email the district office, your request should be to the attention of the scheduler.

In your fax or email to the scheduler, you should include what you would like to speak to the Member about and identify yourself as a constituent and member of the Reconnecting Youth Campaign, if applicable. You should also include specific dates and times that you are available to meet. Please see the sample meeting request letter included at the end of this toolkit for your use. If the Member is unavailable, ask to meet with the District Office Director or Legislative Director. If you do not hear back from the scheduler, be sure to call the office to follow up.

## Be Prepared and Responsive

Before your appointment, identify who in your group will be talking about each specific issue. Familiarize yourself with the key points and make sure you have a clear request for your Member.

During the meeting, be prepared to answer questions from the Member. Be sure to stay on point and not go on tangents. If applicable, offer you and/or your group's assistance to the Member. If you can get the Member to commit to doing something, such as joining an Opportunity Youth caucus, circulating a "dear colleague letter," or speaking at an event, that's a bonus.

## Following-Up

After the meeting, be sure to send a thank you letter to the Member. The thank you letter should restate the points you went over in the meeting and should provide any additional information that was requested or that you promised during the meeting.

If the Member made a commitment when you met, be sure to remind them of their promise in your thank you letter. You should also send a copy of the letter to RYC ([info@reconnectingyouthcampaign.org](mailto:info@reconnectingyouthcampaign.org)) so we can stay informed of your contact with Members for our own advocacy efforts in D.C.

## Advocacy Tip #2

Be patient. Closely related to Advocacy Tip #1, being polite, is being patient (and persistent!). Members of Congress are extremely busy people and have full schedules every day. Do not be surprised if a Member is late to a meeting or event, and be flexible with the time that the Member has to spend with you.

# Town Hall Meetings

## Start a Conversation

Town Hall meetings provide a unique opportunity to interact with your Member of Congress. Not only do you get the opportunity to ask a question about Opportunity Youth, but you get to ask it in public, on the record. Town Hall meetings allow advocates to raise the awareness of Members of Congress and other community stakeholders simultaneously—both critical partners on the path to reform.

Town Hall meetings also provide a platform for young people, community members, employers and others who have been impacted by RYC programs to share their experiences. Encourage individuals you work with, who are well prepared and comfortable telling their stories, to attend these meetings and share their experience about a local program in your community. Personal stories can send powerful messages to Members of Congress. To find out more about how to meaningfully and respectfully share personal stories for advocacy go to: [bit.ly/strategic-sharing](https://bit.ly/strategic-sharing). Organize a group of advocates to attend a Town Hall meeting. Show your Member that there are lots of people that support your message. There is power in numbers. Coordinate ahead of time about the questions you want to ask and who will ask them. To find out where and when Town Hall meetings are being held, check your Member's website and/or social media accounts. You can also call the district office or check local news outlets.

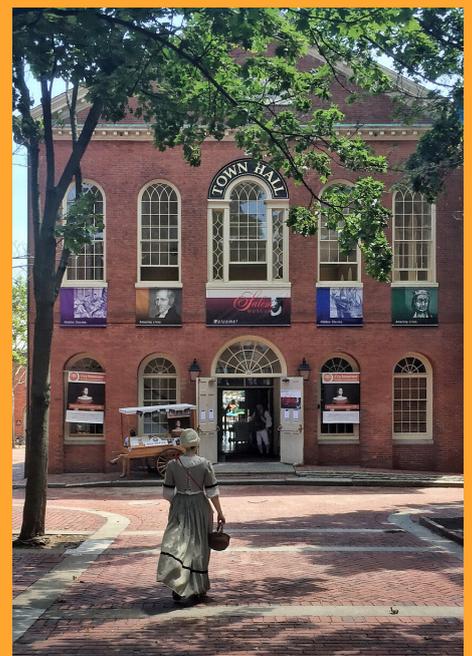
## Sample Questions to Ask

- Federal funding for programs that are reconnecting Opportunity Youth, young people ages 16-24 who are not in school and not working, has not been adequate to reconnect the number of young people seeking opportunities. [Give a specific example of how this impacts a program in your state] How do you plan on securing this important funding for our state?
- Opportunity Youth are young people ages 16-24 who are not in school and not working. In our [state or community], there are currently [Give the number of OY] seeking opportunities for reconnection. How do you plan to support programs reconnecting Opportunity Youth in our [state or community]?

## Advocacy Tip #3

Be prepared. Make sure you practice what you want to say to your Member of Congress before you interact with them. Organize your thoughts beforehand and outline your statements and ultimate ask of your Member. Your ask is what you would like them to do for you: increase funding during the appropriations process, join a caucus, etc.

Whether you are meeting with a Member or his or her staff, they will most definitely have questions for you. You should be able to answer basic questions about the issue you are meeting about. It's okay if you don't know the answer to a question. Never make up an answer. Instead, tell the Member or staff that you will get back to them with the appropriate information—providing a perfect opportunity for you to follow up with the office.



# Site Visits

## Show Your Member What You're Talking About

Everyone knows the saying, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” and that saying holds true in advocacy as well. Having Members see a program that is reconnecting youth or visit a program site first hand speaks volumes. A program site visit allows Members to physically see federal dollars at work.

There is, of course, a strategy behind site visits. The RYC team and your local RYC program site can help identify how to leverage this site visit to engage your Member of Congress - whether it's a program your Member of Congress has particular interest in or addressing an issue area they're passionate about.

Inviting Members of Congress to community-based programs is another terrific advocacy tool. Members get to interact with young people and gain a deeper understanding of the types of programs supported with federal dollars—and those that could disappear if funding continues to decline.

## Scheduling a Visit

Scheduling a site or program visit is similar to scheduling a meeting, yet with more details and logistics. You will still likely deal directly with the district scheduler and will want to send him or her an email or fax with an agenda for the visit, a list of who else will be attending, and dates and times for the visit. They may ask you for additional information. Always be flexible and responsive.

It is important when scheduling site or program visits that you go through all the internal channels that may exist before inviting the Member to attend. Your local program site may already have a relationship with your Member of Congress, or want to help coordinate alongside you. For some programs, you'll want to coordinate with their national office, who can help identify the best program site in your area to visit and prepare you for the site visit.

If your Member is unable to visit your site or program, invite his or her District Office Director, Legislative Director, or most senior staff that works on Opportunity Youth issues to attend. Remember, strong relationships with your Member, always begin with your relationships with staff.



### Advocacy Tip #4

Become a resource. Members of Congress and their staff rely on constituents to feed them information about what is happening on the ground. They see constituents as experts on specific issues and will want you to provide them with the details needed to help them make a case. By offering your assistance and being reliable, you develop a strong relationship with your Member and his or her office. For example, if a bill is introduced in Congress that relates to Opportunity Youth, you want to be the person your Member contacts to ask whether or not he or she should support the legislation and why.

# Op-eds and Letters to the Editor

## Advocacy Tip #5

Be specific. Federal advocacy is all about specifics. Members of Congress primarily focus on the issues that are close to home. When you interact with your Member, you should talk about why the issue is important to you. No matter who you are—a young person, program manager, or advocate—you have a story. You have a reason why increasing access to opportunity is important to you, and you should share that story with your Member of Congress. You must also link your story to a specific policy issue—why increasing appropriations is important—and make the issue relevant to your Member by linking it to specific outcomes in your state.

Without specifics, your issue sinks to the bottom rather than rising to the top. Including facts and figures to support your ask or policy position is extremely helpful when speaking with Members and their staff. Anecdotes about programs that are effective are also helpful for your advocacy.

## Speak Your Mind

Op-eds and letters to the editor are great advocacy tools that can help bolster awareness about Opportunity Youth. Both op-eds and letters to the editor allow advocates to choose and frame their issue.

When pitching an op-ed to a newspaper or other media outlet, you should ask for the editorial page editor. Introduce yourself and tell them you are interested in submitting an op-ed for placement during a specific district work period or other target date. It is helpful when writing an op-ed or letter to the editor if you can link your editorial or letter to another newsworthy item—whether that is a previously published story or an event or holiday.

There are a couple of hooks that will increase the likelihood of having your op-ed or letter to the editor published: as Congress determines their Fiscal Year 2020 appropriation levels, we should focus on investing in programs that work. Also, take a look at local papers to see what types of issues are being talked about and see if you can link your piece to any of those topics.

## Pitching Your Work

The devil is in the details. Be sure to follow submission guidelines for both op-eds and letters to the editor. If you follow their guidelines, you automatically increase the likelihood that your piece will be published. When you send your submission, include a cover note that reminds the editor who you are and reference any prior contact you may have had. Include your contact information in the note. If you do not hear back from the paper within a week, follow up with a phone call. Make sure you are responsive to any follow up questions from the editor and offer to modify your piece if needed.

# RYC Advocacy Priorities

## RYC 2019 Priorities

1. Increase federal funding to reconnect one million Opportunity Youth each year.
2. Build support in Congress for Opportunity Youth

### Priority 1: Fund 1 Million Pathways to Opportunity

Each year, Congress makes decisions about funding for government operations and activities—ranging from national defense, education, and homeland security to the programs that serve Opportunity Youth. This is called the appropriations process. Congress has developed certain rules and practices for this, which it follows when operating under regular order. **We are currently urging the Senate to fund the Reconnecting Youth Campaign programs at the higher level set in the House appropriations bill.**

**About the federal budget:** Discretionary government spending levels are set each year by the House and Senate Appropriations Committees through the appropriations process, and typically account for about 35% to 39% of total federal spending. The rest of the federal budget is made up of direct (or mandatory) spending, which is controlled by House and Senate legislative committees, and net interest on the public debt. There are two separate ways that Congress sets discretionary spending: through authorization bills and appropriations bills. Authorization bills typically come first and establish, continue, or modify agencies or programs.



Then, appropriations measures provide funding for the authorized agencies and programs. Funding for the programs that the Reconnecting Youth Campaign supports are part of the Labor, Health and Human Services (LaborHHS) Subcommittee in the House and the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies (LHHS) Subcommittee in the Senate.

### Appropriations Cycle & Timeline:

The cycle starts with the President's budget submission, which is due on the first Monday in February.

Congress then considers a budget resolution that, in part, sets spending ceilings for the upcoming fiscal year. The target date for completion of the budget resolution is April 15.

Subcommittee and floor consideration of the annual appropriations bills typically occurs during the spring and summer months, but recently has continued into the fall and winter. The federal fiscal year runs from October 1 through September 30. If appropriations are not enacted by October 1, Congress typically adopts a continuing resolution to continue funding, generally until regular bills are enacted. (Supplemental appropriations bills provide additional appropriations to become available during a fiscal year.)

# Following up with the Campaign

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An important part of a cohesive and successful campaign is the collection of all actions being taken from its supporters. With all of the great work you'll be doing in the field for the campaign, it's important to make sure we can share that information with your fellow members, on social media (remember to use **#ReconnectingYouth**), and throughout campaign publications.

Below are several ways to keep the Reconnecting Youth Campaign and other members up-to-date with your campaign activities:

- **“CC” the Campaign Email Address when communicating via email.**
  - When making your appointments, follow-ups, or other communication per the campaign, CC'ing **info@reconnectingyouthcampaign.org** will help the campaign track our relationships with members of Congress. We want to make sure your efforts are also being acknowledged.
- **Send any meeting notes to the campaign**
  - Coordinating and executing a successful meeting with your legislator is a huge accomplishment. The only way we can share that information is through a recap from you. After each meeting, email the campaign email address (**info@reconnectingyouthcampaign.org**) with details of the meeting.
    - Which member of Congress did you meet with?
    - Date/Time/Location
    - Who attended the meeting?
    - Was there any questions you couldn't answer? What were they?
    - Did the Legislator or Staff member ask for follow up? Statistics? More Info?
- **Share photos with the campaign**
  - It's a great idea to take photos while there, but be respectful. Before snapping photos with Congress Members or staff, be sure to ask first.
  - If you're unsure, consider taking a photo outside the office, showing the legislator's name plaque - that is also powerful!
  - Send photos to **info@reconnectingyouthcampaign.org**
  - Make sure you identify who each individual is in the photo.

# Resources to Share

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It is helpful when meeting with Congress to have materials you can share to help educate them about your issue area. To that end, the Reconnecting Youth Campaign has created the following fact sheets and briefing materials that you can print and bring to your meetings, or email to your Member and their staff either in advance, or as a follow up measure.

- **Reconnecting Youth Campaign Introduction:** This sheet explains the Reconnecting Youth Campaign, including listing the programs that we support and the federal funding levels.
- **District Data Sheets:** The Reconnecting Youth Campaign can help prepare you for your meetings with Members of Congress with individualized data sheets for your representative's district. To coordinate this, please reach out to: **[caitlin@sparkaction.org](mailto:caitlin@sparkaction.org)**
- **Reconnecting Youth Campaign Website:** The Reconnecting Youth Campaign microsite has additional resources about the campaign and affiliated programs. Learn more: [bit.ly/reconnect-youth](https://bit.ly/reconnect-youth)

# Sample Meeting Request

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Official Agency Letterhead (if applicable)

[Date]

ATTENTION: [scheduler name] «scheduler»  
The Honorable [Senator or Representative Name]  
United States [Senate or House of Representatives]  
[District Office Address]

VIA FAX or EMAIL: [fax or email]

Dear [Senator or Representative]:

The purpose of this letter is to request an appointment for representatives of the Reconnecting Youth Campaign to meet with you in your district office on [date]. If you are unavailable, we would like to meet with a key member of your staff who handles Opportunity Youth/Workforce Development and appropriations issues.

The Reconnecting Youth Campaign is a collaborative campaign calling on Congress to invest in America's future by funding 1 million pathways to education, training, national service and employment opportunities for Opportunity Youth, 16- to 24-year-olds who are not in school or work.

We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you or a key member of your staff to discuss appropriations for federal funding streams that support reconnecting youth, and the impact these programs have had and continues to have in [your State]. [Name of contact] will call your office to follow up on scheduling an appointment. We look forward to seeing you on [Date]. If we can provide you with additional information or assistance, please contact me at [email and phone number].

Sincerely,

[name]

# Sample Thank You

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Official Agency Letterhead (if applicable)

[Date]

ATTENTION: [staff person]  
The Honorable [Senator or Representative Name]  
United States [Senate or House of Representatives]  
[District Office Address]

VIA FAX or EMAIL: [fax or email]

Dear [Name of the person you met with]:

On behalf of my colleagues at the Reconnecting Youth Campaign, thank you for taking the time to meet with us last week as we discussed more about Opportunity Youth. We were glad to have the opportunity to speak with you about the importance of increasing funding to programs that are reconnecting young people.

**[If applicable]** As we discussed during our conversation with [you or name of staff], we would like to invite the [Congresswoman or Congressman] to visit a local program and see the impact that organizations such as [Local Program Name] have on young people, their families and the local community.

Thank you so much for your time. Great thanks to you and [Congressman or Congresswoman's Name] for your continued leadership on behalf of children and youth.

Sincerely,

[name]

# Appendix

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**Picture Credit:**

Cover (top): The Reconnecting Youth Campaign

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THE  
**RECONNECTING**  
**YOUTH** CAMPAIGN

UNLEASHING LIMITLESS POTENTIAL