



Hosting your Member of Congress For a Food Assistance Site Visit

California Association of Food Banks – August, 2011

Adapted with permission from the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)

Funding for vital federal nutrition programs remains vulnerable as final deficit reduction and agriculture appropriations decisions continue to be negotiated in Congress. Given the prospect of cuts to nutrition programs during continued economic hardship for the people we serve, it is critically important that Members of Congress visit food banks and emergency food distribution sites during the August congressional recess. Seeing constituents of their districts receive life-sustaining food assistance from services supported by TEFAP, CSFP, child nutrition programs and CalFresh outreach can move elected officials to become champions for protecting these programs from damaging cuts.

Scheduling the Site Visit

Arranging a visit with your Member of Congress, or any elected official, requires flexibility and persistence. Just remember, elected officials enjoy meeting constituents and the positive publicity of touring a food assistance site. If you make your request multiple times through the appropriate channels and can accommodate the official's busy schedule you stand an excellent chance of getting to host a visit.

- Make your invitation through your Member's district office scheduler. Call your Member's district office and ask to speak to the scheduler. Be ready to explain the work of your organization, the setting for the visit, and the policy concerns you want to discuss. The scheduler will likely ask that you put your request in writing. CAFB can provide a sample request letter.
- Be persistent. If you have a direct contact in the district or D.C. office also call and email them to make them aware of your invitation and ask that they help secure a visit. You will probably need to call your Member's district office several times, possibly in addition to sending a letter, before you receive any commitment.
- Be flexible. The more opportunities you offer the Member to visit, the more likely he or she will be able to attend.

Finding the Perfect Site

It is important to select a site in a location that has easy access for reporters and your Member of Congress. Ideally, the food bank, pantry, or soup kitchen should provide high quality food that is in some way attributable to TEFAP or CSFP support. This would also apply to child nutrition sites. Choose a location where you will have access to a smaller, private space where you can speak to the Member of Congress uninterrupted for 5 to 15 minutes about your policy priorities and concerns.

As you plan your event, consider the following:

- Visit the site ahead of time – make sure you're engaging site staff as partners in coordinating and taking part in the visit. Think about the picture your visitors will see. Make sure the site promotes your programmatic priorities. For example, if you are promoting funding for TEFAP, allow the Member to see how much TEFAP commodities have been reduced recently or have them meet the people who receive food through TEFAP. You can enhance the food sites with banners, posters, or hunger facts.
- If at a distribution, check the distribution menu ahead of time to ensure that the program will be serving healthy food that will be received enthusiastically during the visit.
- Pick a time and day for the visit when you know participation will be high. If Mondays typically have low participation, schedule the visit for later in the week.
- Schedule the visit so that your elected official and the media are present during the food distribution. Depending on the location, encourage your guest to participate and provide opportunities for them to directly engage with people receiving assistance.

Preparing for the Visit

The key to a successful site visit is to plan ahead so the event is well-organized and runs smoothly.

- A few weeks before the event, develop (or update) your media contact list. Include local media (print, radio and TV) that are likely to attend, state-wide media that may report on the event even without attending, and reporters from your state's major papers.
- Create a press release for the event. CAFB can provide technical assistance or a template for you to use.
- Create a list of assignments so that everyone knows their responsibilities the day of the event.
- Work closely with congressional press staff to coordinate your media kits, press releases, materials, and quotes. Partnering with the Member's district press secretary will often ease the burden on you since the office has many press contacts and the Representative generally will be looking for positive press from the visit.
- Also, determine how much time the Member will have at the site and provide a timeline for the event so that staff will know what to expect.
- Create a packet of background materials for your elected official. The packet should contain your press release, relevant fact sheets, brochures and outreach materials and any other helpful information.
- Identify a staff member in your organization to take pictures at the event and discuss ahead of time the images you are hoping to capture.
- Prepare volunteers and any regular clients in advance. Tell them about the visit and what they should expect that day. If possible, include them in the preparations and allow them to be involved in planning the event.

Crafting Your Message

Your elected official may not have a lot of time to spend at the site so you should prepare a succinct message.

- Research what issues are priorities for your elected official. For example, if he or she is particularly interested in Social Security or Medicare, focus on how federal nutrition support enables you to assist seniors.
- Regardless of the specific approach you take, your main messages should be:

Federal nutrition programs enable our organization to provide critical nutritional support to low-income families. Food hardship in our community is at record levels, with __ in __ people (use local data) unable to afford enough food. Unfortunately, funding for critical programs like TEFAP, CSFP, and child nutrition program is at risk from deficit reduction measures and spending reductions. We cannot meet the rising need without these programs. Please work with us to protect federal nutrition programs from any cuts in federal deficit reduction measures or future appropriations.

Working with the Media

To maximize the impact of the visit, you want to get as much media attention as possible.

- If possible, schedule the visit earlier in the day. Television and newspaper reporters often have early afternoon deadlines for the evening news and thus prefer mornings.
- Alert the media as early as possible, preferably at least three days in advance of the visit. If your city is served by a news wire service, make sure that your event is listed in the daybook. Contact community newspapers, local television network affiliates, cable access channels and radio stations – they are likely to cover the visit.
- Assemble media kits for reporters. The kit should include your press release, fact sheets, and brochures. List the names of staff contacts and other organizations involved in the event, along with telephone and e-mail information.
- Reporters should respect the privacy of individual clients and families at the site. If possible, identify a few clients willing to talk to reporters about the positive impact the food bank, food pantry, or soup kitchen services have had on their families.

Creating the Perfect Photo Op

- Ask you elected official if he or she would like to distribute food or serve meals.
- Make a special hat or apron for your guest to wear.
- Encourage your guest to sit and talk with clients while they eat or wait for their food package.
- Take a picture of your guest with people served by the site.

Discussing the Imperative to Protect Program Funding

After your elected official has seen food assistance programs in action, create an opportunity for him or her to meet with key stakeholders privately to discuss protecting program funding and integrity in the federal budget and deficit-reduction processes. Stakeholders could include anti-hunger advocates, food bank staff, program sponsors, community leaders, and anyone else invested in protecting federal nutrition programs. This is an opportunity to discuss specific impacts funding reductions in these programs would have on your organization's services. (Note: The media normally should not be present for this part of the event.)

After the event is over, remember to follow up with your elected official.

- Contact legislative staff to answer any questions and offer opportunities for follow-up activities, such as writing an article for a newsletter to constituents.
- Share any press coverage you receive with your elected official and publicize the event to your network.
- Place photos and articles about the visit on your website and in your newsletter.

Utilizing CAFB as a Resource

CAFB can be a resource for you as you plan your site visit. CAFB staff can provide sample invitation letters and media releases, as well as advice and assistance on planning the visit, talking points, and compiling local information on hunger. Every visit is unique and CAFB staff is prepared to help you make your visit a success. Contact Eric Manke (510-350-9915 or eric@cafoodbanks.org), or Tim Shadix (510-350-9917 or tim@cafoodbanks.org) for assistance in planning a visit from your Member of Congress. Please also keep CAFB policy staff informed of any visits you schedule with a Member during the August recess.



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**The California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) represents 41
community food banks working to build a well-nourished California.**