

HOW CAN I ADVOCATE IN SOLIDARITY WITH CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES?

Visit your Representatives, Neighbor to Neighbor

Why call them Neighbor-to-Neighbor visits?

Bringing together a delegation of faith and community leaders to establish and nurture relationships with your senators and representatives is crucial for changing the “unjust structures” within our society. When members of Congress know their constituents care about refugees, family unity, humane enforcement, and immigrants’ rights, they vote accordingly. As both representatives and members of your communities, every senator and representative has an office – often multiple offices – in their home states. Visits to these offices are an impactful way to speak, neighbor to neighbor, with representatives and let them know why and how the laws and policies that affect refugees and immigrants impact your community.

Purpose of Neighbor-to-Neighbor In-District Visits

1. To fulfill the promise of our baptismal covenant and “strive for justice and peace.” Neighbor-to-neighbor visits put faith into action by demanding that senators and representative understand that we, as constituents and people of faith, want to see compassionate and just immigration policies enacted.
2. To persuade your senators and representative to vote for policies that protect vulnerable people seeking peace and safety, prioritize family unity for all families, and provide a pathway to full citizenship for the undocumented members of our community.
3. To build relationships between people of faith and the public officials who make decisions that impact our communities.

It is helpful to meet with your senators and representative as often as you can. Educating your decision makers about the role your congregation and/or interfaith partnerships play in the strength and health of the community takes time, but these personal connections are capable of changing someone’s mind and stance on an issue, and are essential to making our communities more welcoming.

Your Neighbor-to-Neighbor Visit: BEFORE THE VISIT

Organize a team: Before you meet with your senators and representative, get a team together. A team ideally includes faith leaders, service providers and/or people whose lives have been directly impacted by the immigration system. Be strategic in finding team members who best represent your community’s “ask”- are you meeting with your representative to discuss the care of unaccompanied immigrant children? Do you have anyone in your congregation or network with child welfare expertise or a personal story? If you are discussing the importance of immigration reform, can you share a story of how the broken immigration system has affected your community, or bring someone who can share that perspective? Talking services for refugees and/or immigrants? See if you can find a service provider to share their experiences. And don’t forget to engage community leaders who the senator or representative may already know and respect.

Building a team makes advocacy more sustainable, as you can commit as a group to ongoing outreach within your community and ongoing relationship building with your members of Congress. You might also think of including the impacted communities in your area- recent immigrant communities or congregations and refugee communities – reach out and ask a leader or representative from those communities to join your team.

Aim for 5-10 participants for a visit, though a larger group can be a powerful sign of support for the issue. If you are considering bringing a larger group, check with the member’s scheduler to see how many people the office can

accommodate, and be sure your meeting is well-planned so that you are focused on your message and everyone knows their specific role.

2. **Find out who represents you in Congress and get to know your audience:** Go to <http://capwiz.com/jesuit/dbq/officials/> to find out who your senators and representative are. Find out where they stand on the issue important to you, including past votes on pieces of refugee and immigration legislation that are important to you. Their websites and a quick Google search will show how they vote and what they have said, as well as biographical sketches, campaign statements, district demographics, occupation, religion, political and social memberships, areas of interest, and positions on other issues, all of which can inform your approach to the meeting. For specific bills, www.thomas.loc.gov is a good resource.

3. **Have a plan:** Meetings with decision makers should always be tied to your larger advocacy strategy, since meetings are just one of many activities important to creating more welcoming communities. Before you visit your members, always meet with the other participants to assign roles, including the facilitator, the personal story, specific issue points, and the “ask.” Practice by role-playing before the day of your meeting so that everyone feels comfortable with their role and knows what to do. Review your talking points and prepare your materials. Consider bringing materials such as statements from specific faith groups and news clippings of relevant local events. It can be tempting to try and cover every piece of the immigration system important to your community but keep the message clear, concise and consistent. Remember this is the time to let your Representative or Senator know where your community stands in terms of the U.S. policy toward Central American children and families fleeing violence. You can always follow-up with the office to discuss related topics and share resources. After all, you are building this relationship meeting by meeting- so keep in touch with the office!

Suggested Meeting Roles:

The Facilitator will kick off the meeting by introducing your group, explaining the purpose for the meeting, and providing space for each person attending to briefly introduce themselves. Make sure each participant introduces which congregation and/or organization they represent. The facilitator will also jump in if the meeting goes off-track and redirect the conversation.

The Personal Story is key to every meeting. Someone should be present who can tell a compelling story about why you are committed to the U.S. offering an appropriate response to the current crisis in Central America while protecting children and families who have fled to our border. Telling this story will show how real peoples’ lives are impacted and how your knowledge of the issues presented.

Specific Issue Points: There will be specific points your group will want to make about the policy proposals currently being considered by Congress. It will be helpful to have one person take on each of these issues to show they are distinctly important. Present a brief two minute reflection from a faith perspective on why preserving the rights of children and families seeking safe haven in the United States is an important issue for your community.

The Ask is the critical part of the visit when you ask, “Can we count on your support for _____ (children and families fleeing violence in Central America; responding with real solutions to the humanitarian crisis in Central America)?” Listen carefully and ask for clarification if what they say is vague.

4. **Schedule a meeting:** Call, email, or fax the local offices of your senators and representatives to request a meeting with the member to discuss immigration. Make sure to tell them how many other faith leaders and community members would like to attend with you. If the member is unavailable, ask to meet with a staffer who works on immigration issues. Be persistent and don’t be discouraged if you need to follow-up in order to get a meeting scheduled.

Your Neighbor-to-Neighbor Visit: DURING THE VISIT

Below is a suggested framework, but please adapt it to fit your team, your stories and your member of Congress.

Introductions: The Facilitator should start the meeting by thanking the member for their time, introducing the group as a whole, and then having each person introduce themselves.

People of faith throughout _____ (town/city/state) are committed to acting out our faith by being good neighbors to migrant and refugee families. We do this by _____ (Include a story of the work you or other faith groups in your community have done in support of refugees and immigrants – anything from ESL classes, to legal clinics, to days of prayer, to donations to diocese working on the southern border, to advocacy, to other ministries.)

We count you, Senator/Representative _____, as our neighbor, too. We commend you for demonstrating the hospitality of our community by _____ (Find some comments or legislation the member has worked on in support of immigrant and/or refugee communities.)

We'd also like to ask how you plan to be a good neighbor to immigrant workers and families going forward, especially as we respond to the humanitarian crisis in Central America and look to create a just and compassionate immigration system.

Story: Share a story demonstrating the harrowing circumstances compelling children and families to flee Central America

Specific Issue Points: Provide the member with the materials you prepared and explain specific issues, and statistics. Some suggested talking points on these issues are below:

Humanitarian Principles: We seek to preserve a proud American tradition of offering safe haven and welcome to people fleeing persecution and peril. We support policies that recognize the inherent dignity of every human being, keep humanitarian values at the center of our policies, and avoid over-reliance on detention.

Children who may be fleeing violence and seeking safety in the United States deserve to have a full and fair process to determine their reasons for migrating and their best interests as children. The wellbeing of vulnerable children must remain the driving force behind our policy response and this process must move at the speed of a child's trust, taking into account the trauma and victimization they have fled, rather than at the speed of political convenience. Children should have access to child welfare personnel, legal counsel, and the services they need to navigate the immigration system. The TVPRA and other laws governing the protection and care for unaccompanied children should not be changed and increases to family detention should be opposed.

Make your ask: We believe that in order to truly be good neighbors and true inheritors of our country's legacy of welcome for people forced from their homelands, we must welcome the refugee, the victim of trafficking, the child who has been abused or abandoned. Can we count on your support for _____? How can we best support you in our mutual goal?

Listen well and take notes: Much of advocacy involves listening, providing opportunities for the member to ask questions, looking for indications of the member's views, and finding opportunities to provide helpful information or correct misinformation. Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard instead of only being talked at. Ask questions and engage in conversation. Answer questions honestly. If you don't know the answer, say that you don't know but you will find out. Assign one person in the group to follow-up.

Leave Behind Materials: Bring with you educational information, policy recommendations, sign- on letters, charts, studies, faith resolutions, etc., all within a packet of resources to leave behind with the member’s office. There are many helpful resources at the back of this toolkit.

Thank you and invitation to a community event: Thank you for your time and support. We will be hosting _____ (event, prayer vigil, etc). Can we count on your attendance? In the meantime, please let us know how we can be a support to you as we all come together in _____ (town/city/state) to be good neighbors and a welcoming community.

Remember to get the contact information and cards for the staffers you meet. Consider asking the member and staff to take a photo with your group – most politicians love the photo op!

Your Neighbor-to-Neighbor Visit: AFTER THE VISIT

Debrief your meeting: It’s important to make sure you are all on the same page immediately after leaving the meeting, while the conversation is fresh in your mind. Make sure to leave the office building so your debrief conversation can’t be overheard. As a group, review: What did we hear? Did we get what we wanted? What are the next steps? Choose one person to send a follow-up email attaching the documents mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, and continuing to engage the member and staff in your group’s work. It’s also important to evaluate your group’s work. How did we do as a team? Share the information learned during your meeting with your state coalition and other allies.

Communicate with your base: Make sure to take notes and report back how the meeting went to other groups with whom you are working with. The information from your meeting will inform your next steps on strategic action and is important for those who couldn’t come to the meeting to feel included in the process.

Follow up with your member of Congress: Send the staff you met an email thanking them for their time, attaching any documents you mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, and restate your ask.

Call Washington, DC: Call the Interfaith Immigration call-in line at 1-866-940-2439 or the Capitol Switchboard at **(202) 224-3121** to be connected to the DC offices of your senators and representatives. Introduce yourself as a constituent and ask for the staffer who works on immigration. Tell them about your meeting with their local office, ask what they are doing to support and enact humane policies. Oftentimes the local and DC offices do not communicate about visits, so it’s important to follow up with the DC office as well.

Our staff in DC and our interfaith partners can then follow up with the DC staff to reinforce your visit and to make sure we have an accurate understanding of where the Representative or Senator is on this issue!