1. Establishing the Relationship

If you don’t already know your member of Congress, you should spend some time learning about them. You can look at the information on their Web site, which should tell you a bit about their background and interests. You can find out what committees or subcommittees they are on, and see if they are relevant to global poverty issues. You can investigate their voting record to learn what types of legislation they have supported or opposed in the past. You can read articles about them or find people who know them.

While research is a good first step, it is important to remember that even if they aren’t very engaged in global poverty issues, your delegation has the opportunity to educate them and pique their interest in these issues. If your member of Congress is already a “champion” of global poverty issues, it is important to acknowledge their contributions and thank them for their continued support.

2. Timing

Timing your advocacy is a crucial part of being an effective advocate. Unfortunately, it’s not always possible to know months or even weeks beforehand when you need to address legislators on important global poverty policies. The CARE Action Network closely monitors these situations, and as soon as an issue arises that requires immediate action, we will let you know. If you have been building a relationship with a member, your advocacy during these critical times goes much farther.

At other times, it is possible to anticipate future advocacy actions. Important dates, meetings, publications and heightened media exposure could all present possible opportunities for action. For example, the U.S. government decides what amount of the federal budget will be set aside each year to fund global poverty reduction initiatives. During this process—from the time the president introduces the budget until it is finally approved by Congress—your advocacy work will be important. With your voice, legislators will know that people in their district care about foreign assistance funding.

There are multiple ways to reach out to your member of Congress and have your voice heard. It is important to remember that your overall goal is to build a relationship with your member of Congress and establish yourself as someone they can trust and respect.
3. Be Concise!

Communications are most effective when someone can quickly understand the issue and your position. This is important because it is likely that you will have limited time to convince a legislator or staff member of your views. Effective advocacy is based on communication that is simple, polite and to the point. It also is effective to relate the issue to things that happen in your district or tell a compelling personal story that illustrates why you are advocating for the issue.

4. Be Authentic and Accurate

By including the following elements in all forms of communication, you will be able to represent yourself as a good source of reliable and balanced information.

Ask yourself these questions when advocating for a policy:

- Does the policy make sense to me?
- How does it affect my district/state?
- Are there constituents that know or care about the issue?
- How does the legislator vote on global poverty policies?
- Can voting in favor of my issue politically help or hurt the legislator?

5. Different Forms of Communication

Of the many ways constituents communicate with their legislators, some are more effective than others. In general, face-to-face meetings are most effective in getting a message across. Once you’ve met the member or staff person, a phone call can also be effective. Writing personalized letters is another important way of communicating—but they must be sent by e-mail, as security concerns have slowed congressional mail delivery.

Always identify yourself as a constituent right away. Be sure to include your e-mail and mailing address in any form of correspondence. Social media, including Facebook and Twitter, can also be used as an effective way to reach members of Congress. “Like” your legislator’s Facebook page to learn the latest news about their schedule and events they’re hosting. Post comments expressing your support for, or opposition against, issues on CARE’s policy agenda. Members of Congress and their staff are using social media as a way to keep in touch with their constituents and monitor their opinions on a variety of issues.
6. Town Hall Meetings

Another way to see your member of Congress in your district is to attend a town hall meeting. These open community meetings often take place during a recess period and provide constituents with the opportunity to meet publicly with their legislators to share their views. Town hall meetings are publicized in local newspapers, newsletter mailings, and members’ websites. If you have the chance, try to attend a meeting and make your views known. To follow up, seek out a staff member at the meeting and provide that person with a business card or other contact information.

7. Action Alerts

Periodically, CARE will send action alerts about an issue or piece of legislation that is under consideration in Congress and ask you to send an e-mail or make a call to your member of Congress. Calling a member’s office can be effective, because staffers often keep a tally of telephone calls on a given issue. Members see the running count before a vote and often cite these numbers on the floor and to the media. As you build a relationship with the staff, an occasional call, when it’s important, can be seen as a trusted source of information.

The action alert will provide you with background information and relevant discussion points. If calling, ask to speak with the staffer who handles the issue you are calling about or leave a message about your concerns with the individual who answers the phone. Express your opinions simply, stating the main reasons you support or oppose the legislation. Keep your statements short and to the point and be sure to give your full name and address.