



# BUILDING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH DECISION MAKERS



## MAIN MESSAGE:

- Get to know the decision maker before you reach out
- Regularly communicate with decision makers
- Invite decision makers to events and activities

## WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH DECISION MAKERS

Advancing tobacco policies relies upon the relationships built with decision makers and their staff. Getting to know city council members, county supervisors, and state legislators and their staff is a critical function of advocates striving to end the tobacco epidemic. These decision makers are opinion leaders in the community and are influential about issues that get addressed in a community. From the standpoint of advancing local tobacco policy issues through campaigns, decision-makers literally hold the power to move forward or not. That's why it's critical for the coalition to build strong relationships with decision makers – even those who are not your usual allies in tobacco control.

Not everyone has had experience engaging with elected officials who seem to be very “important” and “powerful” people. They are regular people and following the simple steps and tips here can help demystify the decision maker and create opportunities to build strong relationships with them.



## 1. GET TO KNOW YOUR DECISION MAKER.

Take the time to research and learn about the decision makers in your community. Go to their website, read news articles about them, learn about their interests and what motivates them. Take note of any public statements about tobacco and other public health issues. Attend their events, even if they are not tobacco or public health related.



## 2. SCHEDULE AN INFORMATION & EDUCATION MEETING

An important step in building relationship with decision makers is to meet with them. If you don't already know them, it's an opportunity to introduce yourself and other coalition members and to educate, inform and update them on your activities. Use the Tobacco Endgame Center's *Tips for Having an Effective Legislative Visit* to help you prepare and conduct the meeting.



### 3. REGULARLY COMMUNICATE

Once you've made contact and held a meeting, it's important to maintain regular communication. With the demands on their time, decision makers are more likely to provide time to those where rapport has been built. Aim to connect with them once a month to update them about coalition activities and perhaps more frequently if in the middle of a local tobacco policy campaign. Here are a few ideas for creating communication opportunities:

- Provide updates about the coalition's activities and current campaigns.
- Send interesting news articles, research or reports about tobacco.
- Provide any local data about tobacco and vaping use.
- Provide survey data that shows how a specific issue or campaign is popular with the voters in their jurisdiction.
- Inform them about the tobacco policy activities of neighboring jurisdictions.
- Request another meeting to provide key updates (all the things above).

**Don't just reach out when you want something from the decision maker.**



### 4. ENGAGE: IT'S A TWO-WAY STREET

Inviting decision makers to your events and activities is an effective way to build and grow a relationship. The more engaged they are, the more likely they will support and provide tangible help. Here are some suggestions:

- Invite them to a coalition meeting.
- Send them a flyer and invite them to a tobacco-related community event or activity.
- If appropriate, invite them to a campaign event or activity.

Take the initiative to get engaged with the decision makers' activities. Try these:

- Sign up for their newsletter.
- Follow them on social media.
- Attend their community events, as appropriate.

### KEY TOOLS:

- > Tips for Effective Meetings with Legislators
- > How to Have an Effective Meeting with a Legislator (video)
- > Decision Maker Matrix
- > Circles of influence

\*Tools can be found at [organizingtoendtobacco.org](http://organizingtoendtobacco.org)



### 5. BECOME A RESOURCE

By establishing yourself as helpful, knowledgeable, and reliable, they will be more receptive to listening to your concerns and perhaps becoming a supporter of the work of the local coalition, issue or campaign. For example, if you learned that the decision maker is interested in children's health, help connect them with resources on flavored tobacco products and what the coalition or campaign is doing to address the issue. As mentioned above, providing relevant news stories, research and reports about tobacco will help cement your role as a reliable resource.



### 6. THANK THEM FOR THEIR WORK

With the ease of social media platforms, decision makers often see a lot of negative reaction to their work, but seldom see gratitude or thanks on behalf of your community and their constituents. Take the time to send an email, make a phone call, or tag them in an appreciative post when the decision maker votes favorably on a tobacco policy issue. Congratulate them on any awards or honors they have received.