Building Relationships with Newly Elected Officials: A Checklist for Pennsylvania Nonprofits

Questions about nonpartisan civic engagement? Email Anna Keilly, PANO's Senior Manager of Policy & Advocacy.

The big picture:
In January 2027, newly elected members of Congress, Pennsylvania state legislators, and the governor will be sworn in and begin setting their priorities. The weeks between now and then are the best window nonprofits will have to introduce themselves, before offices are fully staffed and the requests pile up. The National Council of Nonprofits (NCN) has released two checklists for this moment, one for members of Congress and one for state elected officials. Both lay out a practical path for turning new policymakers into long-term champions for the sector.

1. **Introduce Yourself Now, and Meet with Staff in Mid-January**
   New offices can take several weeks to hire staff, but don't wait. Between now and mid-January, send a short note congratulating the official on their win. Briefly explain what your organization does, who you serve in their district, and how you can be a resource. Once the office is staffed in late January, schedule a meeting with the relevant staffer. Before you go, research the official's interests and look for where your work connects to them.

2. **Invite Them to Tour Your Nonprofit**
   NCN calls this one of the most effective ways to build a champion. Invite officials to see your work firsthand and meet the people you serve. Showcase your results and explain how federal or state policy affects what you do. For members of Congress, timing matters: they're typically home on weekends and during recesses.

3. **Become a Reliable Resource**
   Staff work long hours on tight schedules. The more useful you are to them, the more they will come to rely on your expertise. Share local information that helps them understand their constituents' needs and the policy solutions that matter most. You are the expert on your issues, and they can learn from you.

4. **Follow Their Committee Assignments**
   Early in the new year, new members of Congress and the General Assembly will be assigned to committees. Note which committees each of your officials serves on, and tailor your message and asks to the issues they have jurisdiction over.

5. **Prioritize the Right Policymakers**
   NCN's state checklist suggests focusing outreach on three groups. First, the officials who represent the district where your organization is located. Second, those who represent the districts you serve. Third, legislators who care about your issues or sit on relevant committees, wherever their district is. Many Pennsylvania nonprofits serve communities well beyond their home district, so the second and third groups are easy to overlook.

6. **Keep It Going All Year**
   One meeting does not make a relationship. Stay in regular contact. Share updates and achievements, invite officials to your events, weigh in on policy that affects your work, help when you can, and publicly recognize them when they act on your issues. That trust is what makes them more likely to act when you have an urgent ask.

7. **Stay Connected**
   Advocacy is stronger when nonprofits speak with one voice. NCN encourages organizations to connect with their state association of nonprofits to find advocacy opportunities and work in coalition. PANO's regional legislative breakfasts are a ready-made way to meet your state legislators face to face. Email anna@pano.org to get connected.

Why all this matters for Pennsylvania nonprofits:
The timing is pressing at both levels. In Washington, the next Congress will make decisions on appropriations, federal grantmaking rules, and nonprofit oversight that affect organizations statewide. In Harrisburg, new legislators will arrive in January with few ties to the nonprofit sector, and the 2027-28 budget process begins almost immediately. An official who has toured your program and knows what a funding delay means for their constituents is far more likely to stand with the sector when it counts.

A reminder on the rules:
Congratulating elected officials, sharing information about your work, and hosting tours are all appropriate activities for 501(c)(3)s. Keep outreach focused on your mission, and extend it to officials of both parties.

Resources:

- NCN Checklist: Building Relationships with Members of Congress
- NCN Checklist: Building Relationships with State Elected Officials