



Toolkit: Congressional Visitors and Your Camp



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ACA PUBLIC POLICY



Why Invite a Member of Congress to Camp?

Summer is a great time to invite your Congressional representatives to camp. We encourage camps to invite members of Congress to camp to promote stronger and healthier ties between camps, the community, and elected officials. A well-planned visit to camp by a government representative can provide them with the opportunity to witness first-hand the power of the camp community, and learn how the camp experience enriches the lives of children, youth, and adults.

Camp is more than recreation; as part of a system of year-round education, it contributes to the growth and development of children, youth, and adults. The camp experience significantly enhances the work done by schools, civic organizations, and government institutions, providing a safe and nurturing environment that gives children a sense of community and helps them to grow into healthy adults. Kids are less at-risk when they feel loved, capable, and included. Camp fosters these feelings of accomplishments and self-worth, offering a supervised, positive environment with well-defined boundaries that allows children and youth to mature and develop. Camp also builds compassionate, committed leaders who understand the meaning and value of community service.

Camp provides opportunities that are critical to a child's total education. The camp community includes caring adults who offer experiences that promote discovery, exploration, and active participation. Children grow and develop their potential by taking healthy risks at camp. The camp experience also teaches young people the values of shared responsibility and strong stewardship of the environment. Camp enriches lives and builds better tomorrows.

Visits to camps by elected officials will help bring these messages home to parents and children. Interacting with the people who make the nation's laws will help campers understand how government works and what our democratic system will expect of them as they reach adulthood. Legislators and policymakers will, in turn, gain a better understanding of the camp experience and greater appreciation for the next generation of Americans.

Resources Available

The American Camp Association has several resources that may assist camps in securing a visit by a member of Congress.

- The first resource is the ACA's Outcomes Research Study. It can be accessed online at: <http://www.acacamps.org/research/>.
- The second is the ACA Public Policy Position paper on Year-Round Education. This paper addresses the value of a camp experience to the development of the whole child. It can be found online at: <http://www.acacamps.org/publicpolicy/position-statements>.
- Third, you can find the Web sites, contact addresses and telephone numbers, as well as tips on writing your elected officials, at: <http://acacamps.capwiz.com/acacamps/home/>.

Inviting your Members of Congress to Visit Camp

Step 1: The Invitation

Letters of invitation should be sent to your members of Congress as early as possible. The letter should do the following:

Introduce Yourself

Invite the member to spend a day at camp to highlight the role camps play in the community and how they contribute to the personal development of children and youth.

Provide a profile of the camp, including:

- A brief history and description of the camp's location
- The number of campers & employees, and some information on the camp's economic contribution to the area
- A little about the campers who attend – their ages, residence, diversity, etc.

Describe what the member will experience during the visit, such as:

- Campers involved in activities
- Events in which he or she may participate
- A briefing and tour of the camp
- Opportunities to talk with campers and staff

Explain what you hope he or she will contribute, such as:

- How much time (options: an afternoon, a full day, an overnight, etc.)
- A speech to the campers in the meeting hall
- Participation in campers' activities

Explain what you will do, such as:

- Film the visit for use in a video
- Invite the press to participate
- Feature the visit in an article for a newsletter or other communication with parents
- Feature the visit on the camp Web site

* Invite the member to bring along family and staff.

* Identify who they should contact to RSVP and make arrangements for the visit.

* Enclose a brochure or other preprinted information about the camp.

Step 2: Follow Up

It is important to follow up the written invitation, call the office to which the letter was sent – either the main district office or the Washington office (or State office if inviting a State level member.) Ask for “the scheduler.” Once you are talking to the correct person, ask whether the invitation was received and if there are any questions.

Step 3: Additional Follow Up

If there is no response within a week, call the office again. Ask if there is anything you can do to make a visit more worthwhile and when you can expect a response.

Step 4: Invitation of Staff

If the member of Congress declines, extend an invitation to Congressional staff from the District or state offices and any Washington staff who may be visiting the area during the summer.

Step 5: Thank You for Accepting Letter

Follow up acceptances with a thank you letter that contains more details on the visit (including background on issues of greatest importance to the camp community and your own community. If you are unsure about the public policy issues relevant to camps, visit the ACA Public Policy Web page at: <http://www.acacamps.org/publicpolicy/>). Let the visitor know about the proposed itinerary and provide any necessary additional information before the time of the visit. The itinerary should include:

- Directions to camp
- Estimated time of arrival
- Who will meet the member and where (transportation from an airport or other location should be offered)
- Briefing by the camp owner/director and senior staff
- Brief tour of the camp facilities
- Observation of or participation in events involving campers
- Assembly of campers for speech by your guest and presentation of mementos of visit (inquire of the Executive Assistant what the rules are for accepting mementos)
- Press opportunities
- Estimated time of departure
- Instructions on casual attire
- Anything else pertinent to the visit

Notes on the Itinerary

- Negotiate arrival and departure time with the staff. It is sometimes better to communicate with a senior staff person in the district, such as the administrative assistant or press aide.
- Plan the visit to focus on those events and activities of greatest interest to the visitor and make maximum use of his or her time.
- The advance briefing at the outset of the visit should include written materials describing the camp, a verbal briefing of 10-15 minutes on the camp, the key legislative issues facing the camp community, and what the visitor will see and experience.

- Your visitor should be offered the opportunity to participate in physical activities, but do not pressure him or her to do so. All anticipated activities, food and refreshments should be mentioned to the staff in advance.
- The visit should be interspersed with photo opportunities with the campers, to allow press and the camp to make print and video records of the trip. Pictures with campers can be sent to both the member of Congress and the parents. Photo opportunities will require some advance work to identify good locations. Assign someone to record the names of those in the pictures.
- The assembly of campers, if possible, ought to be done in an expeditious manner, in a location with good ventilation and sound system. Be sure to check the sound system prior to the program. The visitor should be asked to speak for 5-10 minutes.
- Be sure to do your homework in advance of the visit. You should be familiar with the background of the member of Congress and the issues of importance to him or her.

Media Coverage for the Camp Visit

Although media coverage of a Congressional visit to a camp is important, it should not dictate the course of events. It is important to focus on the four main objectives of the visit:

- To provide a positive experience for the visiting member of Congress
- To lay the foundation for an ongoing relationship with the member of Congress and/or their staff
- To deliver key public policy messages and secure the visitor's support for your issues
- To provide parents and campers with a positive experience and the opportunity to "rub shoulders" with your guest

Invitation to the Media

Before inviting the press, discuss press coverage with the press aide of the member of Congress. They will want to know the press is being invited as well as the parameters of the coverage. Seek their suggestions on how you can maximize coverage to the benefit of the member. Make absolutely sure you do not put the member in a situation in which press coverage may make them uncomfortable.

Direct a letter or phone call of invitation to the news editor, or some other individual with whom you have a relationship.

Invite members of the press, especially broadcast journalists, well in advance of the trip. Film crews are often in short supply and need to be scheduled as far in advance as possible. The invitation should contain the following information:

- Who will be visiting the camp
- When the visit will take place
- Location of the camp
- Background information on the camp
- Reason for the visit
- Those portions of the visit open to press coverage

Tips on Maximizing Media Coverage

- Invite press for a designated time following the briefing of the member. Discussions of public policy issues can be conducted more effectively in private.
- If there are other portions of the visit you do not want covered by the press, schedule those portions immediately following the briefing period. This way, the press are not excluded from any of the activities.
- Advance your visit with an eye toward accommodating the press, particularly television and radio, where pictures and sound are essential and sometimes more difficult to accommodate. For example, if the member addresses campers, make sure that there is space close to the podium for cameras and microphones. If the visitor is scheduled to engage in a camp activity, make sure there is room provided for the cameramen to obtain good footage.
- Provide the press an opportunity to interview the member at the conclusion of the visit. Introduce this portion of the visit by telling the press why the invitation was extended and what public policy issues are important to you. If you do not attempt to steer the interview toward your issues and your camp, the press may engage the member in issues unrelated to the visit.
- Make sure you know the names of the reporters and their news organizations, so you can follow up.
- Provide plenty of opportunities for pictures and sound with the campers. The best photo opportunities produce the best coverage for your camp, and children always make the best pictures. (As with all camp photos, be sure you have signed releases from the parents.)
- Whenever possible, relate camp activities to your key messages, i.e., "This activity helps our campers develop because..." so both the press and the member understand the values on which the camp experience is based.
- Underscore the need for help with key public policy issues during the camp tour.
- Put together a camp media kit, including an itinerary, camp literature, a copy of the press release, contact information, key messages on the camp as a community, and photos.

Sample Letter of Invitation to a Member of Congress

Dear Congressman Jones:

I am the Director of Camp King in Rapid Falls, VA, just off Route 9, and one of your constituents. I would like to cordially invite you to visit our camp sometime during this summer, specifically, the week of July 16th. However, any date that works in your schedule would be great!

Camp King was founded by my family in 1959 as a non-profit organization committed to the development of children and youth in a setting that gives them many of the tools they will need for adulthood. Today our camp employs 110 full and part-time staff and operates at full capacity throughout the summer months. We are host to 700 campers who vary in age from 9-16, and come from a wide variety of economic, ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds. Camp King contributes substantially to the local economy. It is an important part of the community of Rapid Falls.

I can assure you that your visit to Camp King will be enjoyable, educational and informative. You will observe young people involved in a wide variety of activities, from archery to horseback riding to leadership development activities. You will be able to engage them in conversation about their experiences with leadership, social interaction, physical and mental skill development, and just plain fun! You are, of course, most welcome to participate in activities of your choosing, and I will be happy to provide more detail on the options. We hope you would have time to speak to the campers and staff in an assembly sometime during your visit. If you have no objection, we will invite members of the media to record the event. We will also cover your visit in our newsletters and on our Web site. I realize constraints on your schedule may prevent you from spending a full day with us, but whatever time you can spend will be made as productive and as enjoyable as possible. I am absolutely convinced you will find this visit one of the most rewarding stops among the many you make in Virginia.

You are welcome to bring staff along with you and we would be happy to work with your staff to make specific arrangements. Please don't hesitate to call if you have further questions or needs. My direct phone number is: (707) 555-1234; my email address is: director@campking.org.

I am enclosing some additional information about Camp King. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sample Call to the Media about the Congressional Visit

I would like to speak to the assignment desk for area news please.

I am Joanna King, director of Camp King – nine miles west of Rapid Falls, VA. Camp King is a 41 year old camp run on a nonprofit basis for children between the ages of 9-16. We have about 700 young people at the camp each summer.

Congressman John Jones has accepted our invitation to spend a day at our camp on July 16th, and I would like to invite you to cover the visit. We will be highlighting the role of the camp as part of the community and what camp life contributes to the growth and development of children, youth, and adults.

Congressman Jones will spend time at the camp visiting with the campers, participating in activities, and giving a short speech at the end of the visit.

We will try to accommodate your needs as best we can. The tour of the camp will begin at 2:00 pm.

Etc...

Sample Press Release

For Immediate Release

June 16, 2009
Contact: Adam Owen
(707) 555-1234

Rapid Falls, VA – Congressman John Jones will visit Camp King on July 16th, Joanna King, camp director announced today.

King said Congressman Jones will spend the day at camp with 700 campers between the ages of 9-16. The day will conclude with a camp assembly at which Congressman Jones will speak to campers about the importance of good citizenship.

Camp King is located nine miles east of Rapid Falls on Virginia Route 9. The camp, founded by the King family in 1956, a non-profit facility, serves youth from eight states over a 6-week period. The camp provides housing, meal service, health care and transportation services.

“Camp teaches young people how to be good stewards of the land, how to get along and make collective decisions, and how to develop physical and mental skills,” King said.

“We are delighted that Congressman Jones has accepted our invitation to visit Camp King. It will be a good opportunity for the young people to get to know the Congressman and learn more about representative government. Our campers are exposed to democracy and citizenship. Part of their experience is gaining new insights into what is involved in living together, working together and interacting for the common good,” King said.

King declared, “This visit will offer the Congressman a panoramic view of what camp is all about and how much it enriches the lives of these young people. Camp is more than recreation; it is part of a young person’s year-round learning experience.” Jones said the press is invited to participate in the day’s activities.

Further information can be obtained from the Camp King Web site at www.campking.org, or by calling or emailing the camp office. The phone number is (707) 555-1234. The email address is campking@campking.org.

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