



Getting Answers

“Soft Power: Oversight from Personal Offices or the Minority”

As a personal office or a minority member, it can be tough to get your questions answered. You need to keep your eyes open for windows of opportunity when you can get questions answered or get access to documents.

- 1) **Hearings:** Keep a sharp eye on every hearing your member can attend, and pay attention to who will be testifying. You may be able to prep your member to pose questions to agency officials or company executives who might otherwise ignore you. Otherwise, you can share the questions to another Member on the Committee. Don't let the subject of the hearing deter you from pursuing the issues that matter most to your boss. If you wait for a perfectly relevant hearing, you're never going to get answers.
- 2) **Questions for the record (QFR):** Have a complex question or need certain data? Keep track of these questions and wait for opportunities to submit them as QFRs after a hearing.
- 3) **Member meetings:** Potential subjects of your oversight may unwittingly make appointments to meet with your boss to discuss their needs. Stay in contact with your office's scheduler, and be prepared to give your boss questions to ask—or even ask to attend the meeting and ask the questions yourself. If they promised answers and have not delivered, remind your boss to press them on it.
- 4) **Others' staff briefings.** Work with staff from other committees. An agency official or company representative may come to brief other staff on a topic; see if you can be invited to join and ask your own questions. The briefers may try to object, but they don't make the rules, and walking out looks bad.
- 5) **Congressional Research Service (CRS):** An uncelebrated but vital function of CRS is to mask the identity of the office seeking information from an agency. If you can't get a response from a department, call a subject matter expert at CRS and see if they will seek the information for you. CRS has a policy of not disclosing the name of the requester, and agencies are often more responsive with them than offices they don't like.
- 6) **External events:** Sometimes, agency officials you want to question will speak at public events. Attend the event and ask in person. Identify yourself by your member's office and make clear you are asking because you have been unable to obtain an answer through normal channels.
- 7) **Reporter proxy:** Sometimes when you can't get your calls returned, a reporter from a major outlet can come in handy. Consider sharing your question with a reporter and seeing what they can shake loose.