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House Committee Hearings: Preparation

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Summary

Committee hearings provide Representatives an opportunity to gather information on, and draw attention to, legislation and issues within a committee's purview; conduct oversight of programs or agencies; and investigate allegations of mismanagement or wrongdoing. This checklist identifies many of the tasks that need to be performed, primarily by staff, for full committees and (in most cases) subcommittees in advance of a hearing. Some are required by House or committee rules; others are common committee practice.

Committee hearings provide Representatives an opportunity to gather information on, and draw attention to, legislation and issues within a committee’s purview; conduct oversight of programs or agencies; and investigate allegations of mismanagement or wrongdoing.¹ This checklist identifies many of the tasks that need to be performed, primarily by staff, for full committees and (in most cases) subcommittees in advance of a hearing. Some are required by House or committee rules; others are common committee practice.

Preliminary Decisions

- Prepare a memorandum for the chair (and perhaps for other committee members) outlining the need for, and scope of, the hearing; possible witnesses; number of hearing days anticipated; and political considerations, such as the “message,” of the hearing.
- Obtain the chair’s approval to hold the hearing.
- Check the schedule of the chair and ranking minority member, determine availability of and reserve committee hearing room, set dates, arrange for an official reporter, and confirm availability of “essential” witnesses.
- Provide at least one week’s public notice of the hearing, in keeping with the requirements of House Rule XI and any relevant committee rules.
- Several days prior to the hearing, brief committee members and staff and send a memorandum confirming date, time, location, and topic.
- The day before the hearing, call members to determine expected attendance and ascertain that a quorum—usually two committee members—will be present to hear testimony. Check for possible conflicts between hearing times and House floor schedule.
- Prepare an opening statement for the chair, ranking member, and other members.

Witness Selection

- Select witnesses in coordination with committee leaders, executive branch officials, and issue leaders. House Rule XI, clause 2(j)(1) gives the minority the right to call witnesses on at least one hearing day. Obtain required number of copies of each witness’s written statement.
- Invite witnesses by phone, then by formal letter from the chair, providing hearing information and requesting pertinent information. Invitation letters might include date, time, location, and subject; a copy of pertinent House and committee rules; reimbursement information (if applicable); deadline for submitting written statements and quantity required; and the name and phone number of a staff contact.
- Where appropriate, interview, depose, or subpoena witnesses.

¹ This report was written by Thomas P. Carr, formerly an analyst at CRS.

Media Concerns

- Review House Rule XI, clause 4, and pertinent committee rules that provide guidance on broadcasting committee hearings.
- Provide the committee press secretary with material for committee announcements of events and activities on the committee website. In consultation with the press secretary, assemble media kits and arrange interviews or press conferences with the chair and other committee members.
- On the hearing day and in consultation with the committee press secretary, distribute press releases, witness statements, and witness list.

Final Preparations

- Prepare members' briefing books that include description of the subject, scope, and purpose of hearing; copies and comparisons of measures under consideration; pertinent statutes and regulations; court decisions; published articles; a chronology of major events; questions or talking points; and a list of witnesses, biographical information, and copies or summaries of written testimony.
- Assemble materials on the dais, including a gavel and block (for the chair), briefing books, House and committee rules (for the staff), cups and water, and paper and pencils. Place cups, water, and nameplates on the witness table.
- Provide the official reporter with the witness list and statements and members' opening statements.

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