

# Center on Conscience & War

National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors



## MCOA: Preparing for Your Appointment...

### *I. Understanding Our Strategy—*

It is important to understand the strategy behind our lobbying campaign. The current language of the Military Conscientious Objector Act was introduced in 1992 as a bill by Mr. Ron Dellums. Lobbying for the reintroduction and passage of the Military Conscientious Objector Act (MCOA) has continued since 1992 with varying degrees of focus. It was re-introduced as a bill in 1998, but was not passed.

In early 2008 the Center on Conscience & War (CCW) gathered together supporters of the MCOA who have legislative expertise to decide how to move forward. After careful discussion and reflection on past lobbying campaigns it was decided that CCW needed a new approach. This new approach would highlight not only the fact that the current policy for discharging or reassigning conscientious objectors can be suspended (it is not written into law), but that the policy blatantly fails to protect the religious freedom of the majority by not allowing for selective conscientious objection. Selective conscientious objection is supported by the overwhelming majority of faith perspectives (think “Just-War Tradition”) as well as non-religious individuals. Through leveraging this particular measure of the MCOA it is our belief that we can both awaken the conscience of both our places of worship and members of Congress.

We would like to acknowledge that there are multiple ways to frame the issue of conscientious objection. For some of our supporters conscientious objection is a human right, for others it is a civil liberty, and yet for others a conscientious objection is a religious freedom. To some conscientious objection is all three! For the purposes of lobbying we have chosen to frame the right to conscientious objection as a religious freedom. Our reasoning is simple: This is language that ALL members of Congress should understand, especially in light of our country’s attempts to fulfill First Amendment rights, as well as the historical narrative of the United States.

### *II. Your Role as a Grass-Roots Lobbyist—*

You are a grass-roots lobbyist. Your role is not to be an expert on the Military Conscientious Objector Act but to speak from personal experience and express why the MCOA is important to you, the constituent. You should never feel like you are not prepared to meet with your Representative or that you are not an expert on military conscientious objection. This document will help you prepare for your grass-roots lobbying visit.

There are two reasons for visiting with your Representative. The first reason is to convey to your Representative, as a constituent and grass-roots lobbyist, that you support the religious freedom of conscientious objection and believe this right should be protected for those in the military. The second reason for your visit is to leave an opening for the Center on Conscience & War to follow-up with your Representative to further discuss the MCOA.

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## III. Your Meeting—

### A. General Overview

**Plan ahead.** Read through all materials on the MCOA provided by the Center on Conscience & War. All the information can be found online or you can mail us for a hardcopy of all material. Before your meeting be sure to e-mail your Representative's office a copy of the DoD Instruction on conscientious objection (DoD 1300.6), "A Call to Support Conscience: What is Conscientious Objection?," with a brief e-mail verifying your meeting.

**Strategize.** If you are visiting as a group, your group should plan to meet prior to the visit and identify speaking roles based upon personal narratives and the outlined talking points, which follow this section. Make sure you have a question that you want the Member to answer, always asks the member to commit to something, as well as leave an opening for the Center on Conscience & War to follow-up. Ask the staffer to bring an answer back at a set date or agree to send information by a set date.

**Assign roles.** In a group it is often helpful to appoint a spokesperson responsible for explaining the issue based upon the outlined talking points and a "moderator" who ensures that the conversation is focused on the issue of conscientious objection. The discussion should not be monopolized by the Legislator, Aid, or the group. The "moderator" can be the person who watches the time and "signals" the end of the conversation.

**Introduce yourself.** Have each person introduce him/herself. Say where you are from. Identify your affiliation with the Center on Conscience & War, and if appropriate identify your denomination, group, school or local church. Make it clear that you're from the member's district or state. If not from the Representative's district or state then you are here to support the position of the constituent.

**Be flexible.** You should be prepared for both a 90-second meeting as well as a 20-minute meeting. It's not uncommon for the schedules of legislators and their staff to change at the last minute. Be prepared to get your point across even if you don't have as much time as anticipated. Remember, you are not looking for a final answer but for the Center on Conscience & War to follow-up.

**Be honest, respectful, concise and share a personal narrative.** You should concisely address the talking points which follow in the section below. The actual talking points should take less than 4 minutes to deliver. If possible the actual constituent should introduce the talking points followed by each individual's personal narrative. Your personal narrative should reflect why conscientious objection is important to you, as a person of conscience living in the United States. Frame the issue around what you know (religion, military experience, religious freedom, Constitution, etc...). Remember that you are not an expert and it is OK if you are not to be able to answer questions. Offer to find out or have CCW follow-up and send information back to the office. Be polite and respectful, but do not be afraid to disagree.

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**Ask questions.** Ask what the Member's position is on the religious freedom of conscientious objection. Ask if the MCOA sounds like something your Representative's office would be willing to support. If the staff person doesn't know the Member's position, set a deadline for when you will get back to them to find out more concerning your Representative's position. If they are flatly opposed to the legislation, find out what are the particular roadblocks.

**Leave materials.** Bring the MCOA Lobbying Packet developed by the Center on Conscience & War. Also be sure to leave the card for the individual at CCW who handles legislative affairs.

**Write a follow-up e-mail or letter.** After the meeting, write the legislator thanking them for the meeting. Reiterate your position and any commitments made during the meeting. Be sure to send a copy to CCW.

**Conduct a second follow-up through voicemail or e-mail.** If you ask for the staffer to get back to you, make sure you contact them at the appropriate time to get your answer.

**Fill out the Congressional Report Form.** It is imperative that you fill out a Congressional Report Form and immediately send it to the Center on Conscience & War. It is helpful for both the Center on Conscience & War and other constituents of the Representative to know of your experience. This gives us a chance to reinforce your position or refute particular issues.

**Start all over again.** The road to success in lobbying is to build on a relationship and have an ongoing conversation. Sometimes, the most unlikely members of Congress step up in support of difficult issues. And if nothing else, the constant conversation increases our chances of long-term success and the people come to understand what it means to conscientiously object to war.

## ***B. Talking Points***

The following talking points are more generally focused on the issue of conscientious objection. The purpose of these talking points is to allow the Center on Conscience & War to follow-up with your Representative's office and address the more specific aspects of the Military Conscientious Objector Act. It is our experience that the more specific aspects of the MCOA are confusing to both our supporters and Members of Congress. Thus we have decided to have you, as a grassroots lobbyist, focus on these important issues which are likely to rouse interest in the issue of military conscientious objection.

- ***There are many reasons why soldiers choose to enter the military. Military training and the experience of war challenge and change all soldiers' belief structures. Sometimes these experiences within the military result in soldiers realizing that, in good conscience, they cannot participate in war.***

There are many reasons why people volunteer to join the military. Many join for the promise of money for college or job training. People join the National Guard and the Reserves for the purpose of helping during natural disasters or national crisis. They join with the belief that they understand and are prepared for war, or that they are not going to be sent to war. But whatever the reason for joining may be, there are soldiers who come to realization that their conscience will not

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allow them to participate in war. Did you, a family member, or a friend join the military? Use such an experience to illustrate a point

- *The religious freedom of conscientious objection needs to be supported and protected. A law is necessary to protect this right that can currently be suspended.*

The MCOA seeks make the right to discharge or reassignment as a conscientious objector law under the United States Code. The military will not be able to suspend the policy as it did during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. A General Accounting Office investigation found that during the Persian Gulf War around 500 conscientious objectors were jailed, but this number failed to include those who were jailed for refusing orders. There are some estimates that over 2,500 conscientious objectors were jailed.

- *The rights of the majority, as well as the rights of the minority, need to be protected. The current policy does not allow for selective conscientious objection. Those in the military who believe that there can be just wars and unjust wars, as outlined by the "Just War Tradition" cannot be legally recognized conscientious objectors.*

The MCOA would seek to protect the rights of the majority, such as those soldiers belonging to mainline Protestant churches, the Catholic Church, as well as those soldiers who are non-religious. The religious freedom of conscientious objection needs to be protected for all faith perspectives, not just the minority faith perspectives which hold absolutist conscientious objector beliefs. There are many "selective conscientious objectors" in the United States who do not enjoy a "right to freedom of conscience and religion." This undermines our Constitution and the founding ideals of our country.

- *There is currently "bill language"(FYI the Military CO Act is not an actual Bill since it has not been introduced since 1998) that addresses these issues and other problems with the current military policy for discharging or reassigning conscientious objectors. For example, it takes, on average, 7 months to process a CO application. I am not an expert on the current policy, but the issue of conscientious objection is very important to me. I would like to have the individual who handles legislative affairs at the Center on Conscience & War follow-up to discuss these issues in further detail.*

The MCOA and current "bill language" is complex. It is important that you form an initial constituent-Representative relationship around the issue of conscientious objection, leave with a question that you can have CCW follow-up on, or leave an opening for CCW to do a general follow-up to go into more specific details about the MCOA. The talking points have been selected to boldly highlight that the religious freedom of conscientious objection is not being honored by the military. The Center on Conscience & War will follow-up with your Representative to highlight that it is not being honored AND that they habitually violate the current policy.



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