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Field Hearings: Fact Sheet on Purposes, Rules, Regulations, and Guidelines

,name redacted,

Specialist on Congress and the Legislative Process

,name redacted,

Specialist in American National Government

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Field hearings are congressional hearings held outside Washington, DC. They date at least to the Civil War, when committees sometimes traveled to the front lines to observe conditions and war preparedness.

Purposes of Field Hearings

Members and committees hold field hearings for a variety of reasons. A field hearing may bring Congress directly to the scene of an important national issue. A field hearing can serve other purposes. It can

- raise public visibility of an issue;
- provide an opportunity to evaluate a government program “on site”;
- reinforce a Member’s relationship with his or her constituents; and
- attract local, and sometimes national, media attention.

Early examples of field hearings in the 115th Congress included one full committee field hearing in Fort Totten, ND, on implementation of recent laws governing foster care for Native American children; an appropriations subcommittee hearing held at Arlington National Cemetery on current operations and plans for the cemetery; and a full committee hearing in Frankenmuth, MI, on “Perspectives on the 2018 Farm Bill from Michigan.”¹

Chamber Rules

The formal authority for field hearings is found implicitly in chamber rules. House Rule XI, clause 2, states in part that a committee is authorized “to sit and act at such times and places within the United States, whether the House is in session, has recessed, or has adjourned, and to hold such hearings as it considers necessary.” Similarly, Senate Rule XXVI, paragraph 1, states that a committee “is authorized to hold such hearings, to sit and act at such times and places during the sessions, recesses, and adjourned periods of the Senate” as it sees fit. Otherwise, chamber rules do not distinguish field hearings from those held in Washington, DC.

Committee Rules

House and Senate committee rules are generally silent on field hearings specifically, but, in the rules for the 115th Congress, some committees included related provisions. For example, the rules of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence both require that members be notified 48 hours prior to a field hearing. (For hearings held in Washington, DC, the notice requirement is 24 hours.) Rules of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce provide another example, specifying that subcommittee field hearings may be scheduled only when authorized by the chairman of the full committee.

¹ These hearings were held by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs; the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee; and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee, respectively.

Regulations and Guidelines

Funding for committee travel and other administrative issues raised by field hearings are covered by regulations established by the House Administration Committee and the Senate Rules and Administration Committee. In the House, regulations printed in the Committee on House Administration's *Committees' Congressional Handbook* cover matters specific to field hearings; the handbook is available at <http://cha.house.gov/handbooks/committee-handbook>. In the Senate, official travel in general is governed by statute² and regulations issued by the Committee on Rules and Administration.

It is common for committees to prepare guidelines or informal checklists for field hearings based on chamber and committee rules and practices as well as the respective travel regulations of the House Administration Committee and the Senate Rules and Administration Committee. Expenses incurred by a Representative, Senator, or their staff attending a field hearing—including transportation, lodging, meals, and incidentals—are reimbursable by the committee holding the hearing.

Although field hearings involve some administrative matters different from hearings held in Washington, DC, most of the procedural requirements are the same: scheduling, notice, subpoena authority, quorum requirements, broadcasting, and the like. Notably, field hearings cannot be explicitly employed for political or electoral purposes. House Rule XXV and associated regulations forbid official travel for any political or campaign purposes, and Senate regulations forbid reimbursement for per diem expenses associated with official travel during the 60 days before a Senator's name appears on a ballot.³ Members and staff may consult with the relevant chamber ethics committee for additional guidance on permissible and impermissible reimbursements for Members' official and other travel; additional details are also provided in the *Senate Ethics Manual*, the *House Ethics Manual*, and other publications of the House Committee on Ethics.⁴

Venue

No rule or regulation determines a field hearing's location. Committee or subcommittee leadership usually chooses the location, including the specific site, such as a federal building, public school, or private facility. House committees are authorized to procure commercial space when federal, state, municipal, or other public space is not available or not suitable.⁵

It may be necessary for staff to travel to the field location a day or more before the hearing to make certain administrative arrangements—including layout of tables and chairs for Members, witnesses, and the public, as well as setup of video or audio systems. Other advance preparations may include arrangements for security personnel and audio visual technicians.

² 2 U.S.C. 58(e).

³ The Senate regulations provide some exceptions for airfare and in cases when a Senator whose election is not contested. Campaign funds are allowed to cover per diem in some circumstances. See *Senate Ethics Manual*, S.Pub. 108-1, p. 120, at http://www.ethics.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=f2eb14e3-1123-48eb-9334-8c4717102a6e.

⁴ The Senate document is available at http://www.ethics.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=f2eb14e3-1123-48eb-9334-8c4717102a6e. The House publication is available at http://ethics.house.gov/sites/ethics.house.gov/files/documents/2008_House_Ethics_Manual.pdf.

⁵ U.S. Congress, House Committee on House Administration, *Committees' Congressional Handbook*, https://cha.house.gov/handbooks/committee-handbook#disbursements_hearingsandmeetings_fieldhearings.

Author Contact Information

(name redacted)
Specialist on Congress and the Legislative Process
#redacted#@crs.loc.gov , 7-....

(name redacted)
Specialist in American National Government
#redacted#@crs.loc.gov7-....

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This report was originally written by (name redacted), formerly an Analyst in American National Government at CRS. The listed authors have updated this report and are available to respond to inquiries on the subject.

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