

[By Bob Kinzel](#)

Over the past six years, Rep. Peter Welch has held almost 150 "Congress in Your Community" events throughout the state. It's an opportunity for Vermonters to discuss their concerns with the Congressman in an informal setting.

KC Bagels in Waterbury is jammed on a cold winter morning with people who want to spend some time with Congressman Peter Welch.

With very little fanfare, Welch quietly walks into the store, grabs a cup of coffee and begins working his way around the room.

While a number of people want to discuss national issues with Welch, there are others who are seeking assistance from his office:

"How are you?" Welch asked Scott Woodard.

"Hey, Scott how are you?" Welch responds.

"I've got a couple of veterans questions for you. I'm having some issues with the education benefits not being able to transfer to my daughter," Woodard said.

"You're supposed to be able to."

"Well, I retired in 2006 and it's my understanding that the law went into effect in 2008 anybody who retired prior to 2008 it's not available," Woodard said.

"Well let me check into it," Welch said, and turned to a staff member. "Tim, can we get follow up information so we can get back to you? I don't know the answer to that."

"I know you've got a lot on your plate," Woodard said.

Several people express their concern that Congress has become a highly partisan and dysfunctional body. One person asked Welch about his participation in a new group of Republicans and Democrats that hopes to break through the current gridlock on a number of issues.

"It's called the No Labels and it's half Democrats and half Republicans and we have totally different political views in that group some are real small government some are an active get involved government yet we're all appreciating the fact that if we just stand on opposite sides of the line yelling at each other we're not going to get anything done," Welch explained.

Welch turns and immediately meets M.K. Morley. She's a teacher at the local elementary school and she has strong concerns about the reaction of her students following the tragedy in Newtown Connecticut:

"We don't need assault weapons around. Hunting rifles sure," Morley said.

"That must have hit you hard," Welch said.

"Yeah, it was scary. You know, do you want an armed guard in front of your school ? No, not really."

Tim Grey is standing next to Morley and has a very different take on this issue. "I'd like to interject. As someone who's intimately involved in civilian and law enforcement training, safety

training and performance training and who has a daughter who is a school teacher at Northfield, my daughter after Newtown came to me and she said dad, I think it's finally time," Grey said.

"Time for what?"

"Time for her to investigate some way to protect herself and her students because there's no other mechanism to protect them. They have a lock down policy all those kinds of things but we found at Newtown they're just not effective," Grey said.

Welch jumps into the conversation and says the respectful discussion that Morley and Grey are having is exactly what's needed in Washington.

"There's got to be a willingness on both sides to sit down and discuss issues that are contentious and the way you do that is through some mutual respect. There's not a point of view that the person you disagree with is not American, you know what I mean? So there are divisive issues in this country that we have to tell with."

"I look forward to you being part of that solution."

"I appreciate you being here, that's the point," Welch said.

After many of the customers have left the store, Welch says he schedules these kinds of events because they help keep him "grounded" in the real world of working Vermonters.

"I mean this is not Washington. This is Waterbury at a breakfast spot here and it's everyday folks going about everyday lives and it just is such a focus on what the real world concerns are for Vermonters that it really is a touchstone for me and doing my job in Washington and it's pretty easy to get out of touch in Washington," Welch said.

In January 2011, Arizona Rep. Gabby Giffords was shot while she was holding a "Congress in Your Community" event outside of a supermarket in Tucson.

Following that shooting, House leaders suggested that members consider having security with them when they hold these kinds of events. Welch rejected that advice because he says he feels perfectly safe in Vermont.

"To me that would get in the way of the interaction. What's nice about this I can walk in alone and just sit around and I'm very accessible. There's no big deal about this I'm just Peter I happen to be in Congress and I'm here and people feel quite a bit at ease talking about what's on their mind and you know you come in a make a big deal out of it I'll be a total different kind of interaction," Welch said.

Welch will hold his next "Congress In Your Community" event in St. Albans a week from Saturday.