



**Department of New York
AMERICAN LEGION
AUXILIARY**

Legislative Handbook

Introduction

In the December 8, 1997 issue of *Fortune* magazine, a survey listed the American Legion Family as one of the most influential lobbying organizations in the nation. Effective grassroots lobbying works for the American Legion Family because we sincerely believe in our convictions. We live and we vote those convictions. Because we are advocates for our veterans, we support legislative issues which will benefit them, without supporting a particular political party. In other words, we are politically non-partisan.

As private citizens we choose to support particular political parties, run for elected office and actively volunteer in our communities. The American Legion Family logs millions of hours of volunteer work each year. The importance of reporting this activity cannot be stressed enough. Our volunteerism is a valuable lobbying tool. Our report to Congress each year consolidates these activities and indicates to Congress the depth of our commitment to our communities and our veterans. It is noticed in Washington and Albany and it gives us lobbying power.

Our lobbying efforts begin at home. As community and family members, we recognize needs and problems that must be given the attention of our elected officials. We should communicate those issues to our representatives in all levels of government. This can be accomplished in several ways – through in person visits, letter writing, emails, faxes and phone calls.



The Basics of Advocacy

In person visits – “As a constituent, especially a registered voter, you are automatically a high priority and enjoy instant credibility. Remember, veterans have established track records as leaders in government, private industry and in their communities for many, many years. This is not lost on legislators, especially those with no military experience. Active participation in the legislative process demonstrates a commitment to continued service in the community, state and nations.” (Above taken from The American Legion's booklet, How To Make a Difference Through Effective Grassroots Lobbying) The following guidelines may used when planning a personal visit to an elected official.

1. To request a meeting with a lawmaker, call the office and ask to speak with the scheduler. Identify yourself and the topic you wish to discuss. Requests for a meeting are generally requested formally, so follow-up your oral request in writing. Remember that letters sent to Washington can take up to four weeks for delivery, so it is advisable to make your request through the district office.
2. Follow-up your appointment confirmation with a letter or fax. Include the names of all those who will be in attendance, identify issues and provide background information.
3. Lawmakers have very busy schedules and may be unavailable. **DO NOT** pass-up the opportunity to meet with a staffer. Convincing the staffer on an issue can be the first step in convincing the lawmaker.
4. Be punctual. Being early is far better than being late.
5. Dress the part. You are representing the American Legion Family, so wear your Auxiliary pin or hat. Dress professionally if possible.
6. Be brief but on point. Identify the issues and have pertinent facts at hand.
7. Provide a one page fact sheet that addresses your key message. (The Department office of the American Legion has this information available).

8. Be ready to provide additional information
9. Ask for your legislator's stand on the issue.
10. Present a business card, if possible, and obtain the card of the staffer with whom you meet.
11. Thank the legislator or staffer for his time and follow that up with a thank you letter.
12. Don't burn your bridges. Be gracious, even when you feel the meeting was unsuccessful. A legislator opposed to an issue, may be a proponent of some other issue of interest to you.

Letter writing and faxes – When writing to lawmakers, there are some simple rules you can follow that will give you the most impact. These rules apply to letters and faxes. If sending a fax, you should follow up by sending a copy of the letter to the district office.

1. If possible, type your letter. If you must hand write a letter, try to make it as legible as possible.
2. Clearly identify yourself. Make sure you identify yourself as a constituent and include your name and address within the body of the letter, so that it won't get lost.
3. Keep it short. If possible, keep your letter to one page and always focus on one subject. Be factual and support your argument with brief facts.
4. Never be emotional, philosophical, or confrontational. Stick to the subject and to the facts.
5. Summarize your position or request in the first paragraph. Use the rest of the letter for facts and explanation.
6. Two or three facts to substantiate your argument is sufficient. Include facts that personalize your stand, explaining how an issue will affect your community, our veterans, or our organization.
7. Be respectful. Your lawmaker may have a differing opinion and he has that right. You may need to provide facts that will change his opinion.
8. Be specific. Ask for specific action either to support or oppose a specific bill, amendment or other action. If possible refer to the legislation by name and number stating

- who introduced it and summarizing its intent.
9. Thank your legislator.
 10. Ask for a response.
 11. Letters to U.S. Senators and Congressman are best sent to the district offices. Letters mailed to Capitol Hill go through rigorous security screening. They are often delayed, damaged, or both.

Most lawmakers will answer only letters and faxes that are sent by a constituent. If you are a voter in his district, that lawmaker will pay more attention to what you say. The exception is when your organization or company does business in that election district. Then you should specify that and ask for a response.

If you are writing a letter, it is more time efficient to send it to the district office of the lawmaker. Your letter will be read in a timely manner, and the information will be relayed by the staff to your representative. Remember, staffers have the ear of the lawmaker. If you can gain the support and enthusiasm of a staffer on an issue, you can bet that it will be relayed to the lawmaker.

Emails - When emailing legislative offices, your best bet is to obtain the email of a particular staffer. This insures that your email will be read and most likely answered. Always ask for a response when emailing, just as you do when sending a letter. Also, adhere to the letter writing guidelines in the above section. Make certain that you identify yourself as a constituent and include your residential address.

Many legislative offices will delete emails that are not received from a person in the district, so it is important to include your address. It is also advisable not to copy several legislators on one email. Chances are it will be ignored. If you are emailing a committee chairman or member who is not from your district it is best to obtain the zip code of his district office. You have a much better chance of success.

Telephone calls – Telephone calls are best used when time is short, for example, before an important vote. A call may influence the lawmaker's decision.

1. Before you call have your facts together, know the name and number of the bill, who sponsored it and know the section (if there is one) that concerns you.
2. Identify yourself as a constituent giving your name, address and phone number.
3. It is not necessary to speak with the lawmaker. Speak with whomever answers the phone.
4. Present your view point and facts on the issue.
5. Tell the person what action you want taken.
6. Be brief and on point.
7. Be courteous.
8. Ask for a written response to your call, to ensure that your message is passed on.
9. Follow up your call with a letter, after the vote has been taken. Thank the lawmaker, if he supported your view point. Express disappointment if he did not support your view, but express a desire to continue working with him.
10. You can call your district office or the main office. In the case of timely issues, it may be better to phone the main office.



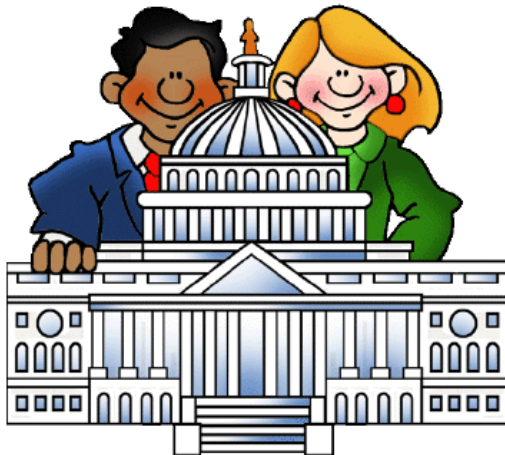
How a Bill Becomes a Law

- Every bill starts with an idea. That idea can come from a constituent who points out a need, a legislator, a state official who sees a need for change or an organization which carries a cause which requires a change in the law. The idea is the beginning point at which you can become involved.
- Once an idea is settled upon it must be written into a bill. Bills are highly specialized documents and generally are written by legal professionals.
- Bills can only be introduced to the legislature by a seated lawmaker except in the case of the state and federal budgets which are introduced by the Governor or President.
- Each bill introduced is assigned a number. The number is revised each time a bill is amended. In the New York State Legislature, bills are assigned the prefix of “A” if it originated in the Assembly and “S” if in the Senate. In Congress, “HR” for House of Representatives and “S” for Senate are used.
- Once a bill has been introduced it is referred to the pertinent committee. Here it is reviewed. A hearing may be called at which testimony is given as to the need for the bill. The bill may be amended by the committee.
- The committee takes a vote to determine if the bill will proceed to the legislature for a vote. If it is passed it proceeds to the floor of the chamber in which it originated. For example, if a bill is introduced in the Senate and passed by the appropriate committee, it will proceed to the Senate for a vote.
- A bill is considered dead if it fails to pass in the committee. A bill which is considered dead may be brought forth through a discharge petition. A lawmaker may request such a petition, but it takes an affirmative majority of the legislature to pass.
- All bills must be given to all members of the chamber at least three days before a vote is taken.
- Once a bill passes the sponsoring chamber it proceeds to the next, for a vote. Some bills are jointly sponsored by

both chambers. Sometimes similar bills are presented by each chamber. Often these bills are consolidated and presented as one.

- If a bill passes both chambers, it then proceeds to the President or Governor.
- The Governor or President may choose to sign the bill into law or veto the bill. If no action is taken at all, after 10 days the bill automatically becomes law. This is true in most cases. However, if lawmakers are in adjournment and no action is taken on a bill it is considered vetoed. This is referred to as a pocket veto. In Congress, a pocket veto happens after 10 days of adjournment. In New York State it happens after 30 days. Pocket vetoes are usually employed if the President or Governor wishes not to take a stand on the bill.

Resources: How to Make a Difference Through Effective Grassroots Lobbying – A publication of the American Legion; American Legion Auxiliary Advocacy Guide; League of Women Voters of New York State Website; US Constitution On Line; New York State Senate Website.



LEGISLATIVE WEBSITES

<http://www.legion-aux.org>

- American Legion Auxiliary Website. Subscribe to ALA eNews, Spirit of America legislative e-newsletter and HomeFront magazine.

<http://www.house.gov/>

- The American Legion Website. Subscribe to The Dispatch newsletter.

<http://thomas.loc.gov/>

- Link to Library of Congress. Search for bills and resolutions by bill or by sponsor. View Congressional Record, committee reports, schedules and calendars.

<http://www.c-span.org/resources/capitalnews.asp>

- Link to newspapers in your state to read about state issues and legislation

<http://www.c-span.org>

- Get updates on Congressional activities, voting schedules and the Congressional calendar.

<http://www.capitalnews.org/>

- Provides latest updates and links to the top stories of the day.

<http://www.va.gov/>

- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Read documentation of testimony given before Congressional committees, legislation pertaining to veterans. Access House and Senate VA committees. Locate you senator or representative.

<http://veterans.house.gov/>

- House committee on Veterans Affairs. Access subcommittees, legislation, schedule, hearings, and contact information.

<http://veterans.senate.gov/>

- Senate committee on Veterans Affairs. Access legislation, issues, hearings, and contact information.

<http://capwiz.com/legion/home/>

- Get a synopsis of legislative issues regarding veterans and the military, access the American Legion position on legislation and locate bill sponsors and cosponsors. Find you elected officials: governor, senators, representatives. Locate governmental agencies. Check on election races in your area.

<http://www.senate.gov/>

- View a biographical and historical directory of senators, representatives, vice presidents. List committees in the Senate. Access Veterans Affairs committee with information on legislation, issues, committee hearings and contact links.

<http://www.house.gov/>

- View directory of representatives, House committees and schedule and a link to the Veterans Affairs committee.

www.capitoladvantage.com

877-827-3321

- Site profiles all Congressional members, contact information, standing committees and state Congressional district maps.

www.leadershipdirectories.com

212-627-4140

- Guide to federal agencies and governmental offices.

www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html

- Congressional Record

www.fec.gov

- Federal Election Commission

www.whitehouse.gov

- White House

www.defenselink.mil

- Department of Defense

www.state.gov

- State Department

www.supremecourtus.gov

- Supreme Court

www.census.gov

- U. S. Census Bureau

www.rnc.org

202-479-7000

- Republican National Committee

www.democrats.org

202-863-8000

- Democratic National Committee

Capital Switchboard

202-224-3121

