

Toolkit for Action Georgia Coalition To End Homelessness

If you have ever worked with a teacher to improve your child's education, you have been an advocate? Someone who looks out for the interests of another, someone who speaks up on behalf of another. Advocates identify a problem? An unrecognized need, a service gap in a caring community, an injustice, possibly a mistake or unintended consequence in a policy or procedure that hurts those who cannot speak up for themselves. And then they go to work to find solutions.

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An Insider's "Top Ten" Guide to Legislative Advocacy

1. Don't be a stranger to your elected officials and their staff members. The most persuasive messages come from familiar faces. Know them by name, and make sure they know you by name. Anonymity is the antithesis of effectiveness. Invite officials to your community partnership programs for conversations and photos. When it comes to creating a positive impression....Seeing is Believing.
2. Introduce yourself at every opportunity. Always have business cards with you and hand them out like candy at Halloween—always have extras. Ask for cards from others and send them an acknowledgement note or e-mail within a day or two of the meeting.
3. Always say "thank you" before you say "please." Even if you disagree with your elected official's positions on some (or even most) issues, they are more likely to listen to you if you've found some way to praise them. If nothing else, thank them for the courage to be a public office holder.
4. A well-written, brief thank you note is always appreciated. Remember, officials get 25 compliments every compliment. Like the wise hotel maitre 'd once taught me in my dining room waitering days, "Only two types of people respond well to an honest compliment –males and females."
5. The hometown connection is essential to help elected officials listen with both ears. Concentrate on principles of policy, rather than too many specifics which may change by the hour. Trust that your "Every day professionals advocates" know the details; your job is to set the stage with your elected officials and to pave the way for your allied advocates at the Capitol. There's a real

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difference between lobbying and advocacy. Lobbyists make it hard for elected officials to say “No.” Advocates make it easy for them to say “Yes.” Advocates do not need to be partisan, do not require a PAC, and never resort to threats or retribution to be effective.

6. Always be concise and to the point. The position, issue or program you advocate should be compressed into a paragraph and a two-minute presentation. The key to influence is not volume, but precision. Elected officials are not experts, but don't want to be overwhelmed with your knowledge. Have them trust you as someone to turn to for more details if they are needed. Sharpen your point and it will make an impact.
7. Engage the media (or schmooze the newsies!!) who have the power to send your message far and wide. An expert source and passionate volunteer are golden to every reporter and editorial/opinion writer—but, be careful: they should not perceive you as seeking “publicity.” Once you're viewed as an accessible expert when they're on deadline, you can pitch them ideas anytime. The media is an advocate's most cost-effective megaphone.
8. Write Letters to the Editor. Submit guest op-ed columns, and encourage allies to do the same. The opinion pages are read word-for-word by every public official. It's where powerful people test the pulse of the thinking community. You have their attention if your case is made in print. Never attack, always attract. Be positive and persuasive, giving your readers a reason to care and act on your behalf.
9. Advocacy requires the art of compromise...never expect it all. While we strive for unanimity, we work for majority. There's a difference between compromising principles (a no-no) and a healthy policy discussion. Long-term relationships require understanding where everyone is coming from before you know where you're going. Burned bridges are impossible to cross, and antagonistic scars may never heal.
10. While there are strengths in diversity, there's power in unity. Bring as many diverse voices to your cause as possible, but reach a unifying message. Agree on the important unifying goals and success will be achieved.

Tips on Telephoning Your Representatives

Call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121 and ask for you Senator's and/or Representative's office.

Remember that telephone calls are usually taken by a staff member, not the member of congress. Ask to speak with the aide who handles the issue to which you wish to comment.

After identifying yourself, tell the aide you would like to leave a brief message, such as: “Please tell Senator/Representative (name) that I support/oppose (name of bill).”

You should also mention your reasons for your support or opposition to the bill. Ask for your Senator's or Representative's position on the bill. It's also a good idea to request a written response to your telephone call.

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Tips on Writing Elected Officials

Think short, short, short. Limit your letter to one page.

Identify the issue or problem in the first sentence, and state your position:

Support your position with an experience from your family or community.

Keep your sentences short and to the point.

Call the congressional office and ask how to send your letter? By e-mail or fax or “snail mail”

Include your name, address and telephone number under your signature.

Address each letter personally. Don’t use “duplicates”

Be sure you spell the person’s name correctly!

If your local newspaper has published a letter on your topic, include a copy to your elected representatives.

If your letter talks a lot about the experiences of your family, include a photo to help see the people it is effecting.

Ask for a written reply telling you how your representative voted.

For Senators:

The Honorable (insert name)
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

For Representatives:

The Honorable (insert name)
U.S. House of Representatives

House Directory
Senate Directory

Communicating with the White House

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Sometimes you may want to call or write the White House to voice your opinion. The Administration uses calls and letters to the White House as a gauge of public opinion. To write to the White House, start your letter with “Dear Mr. President.” If you would like to call the White House in response to a particular issue, you can call the White House comment line at 202-456-1111 to register your opinions on selected issues using your touch-tone phone. You may also choose to leave your message with an operator if you wish.

If you choose to email the white house, send your opinions to President@WhiteHouse.gov.

You may also fax the White House at 202-456-2461.

Many of the same pointers for communicating with congress apply to the White House as well. See “Tips on Telephoning your Representatives” or “Tips on Writing Congress.”

Visiting Legislators in Their Home Districts

Most legislators travel to their home districts often. They go home, in part, to meet with constituents either individually or in town meetings. You can set up a meeting with your representative or senator during one of these visits or attend a town meeting forum to ask a question about your issues.

****Requesting your meeting****

Make your request in writing and follow up with a phone call to the scheduler.

Suggest specific times and dates for your meeting.

Let them know what issue of legislation you wish to discuss.

****To prepare for the meeting****

Decide in advance what you hope to get out of the meeting—an agreement to sponsor a particular bill, for example.

Research the legislator’s previous position on your issue.

Arrange for a small group of people who share your concerns to participate in the meeting.

Decide ahead of time what the group will say and who will speak on each issue.

Limit your visit to one, or at the most two, topics.

If you want press coverage of your meeting, clear it beforehand with the member. Don’t “ambush” the member with surprise or unexpected press or by taping the meeting without permission.

****During the meeting****

If the legislator cannot meet with you, or cancels the meeting, ask to meet with his or her staff.

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Start the meeting by thanking the legislator or staff person for his or her own time.

Present your case clearly and succinctly.

Give examples of the impact the proposed legislation will have on your home, state or district.

Make clear what you want your legislator to do and why.

If you don't know the answer to the question, don't make it up. Offer to find out and send information back to the office later.

Keep control of the time. You will have twenty minutes or less with a staff person, and as little as ten minutes if you meet with your elected official.

Be businesslike.

Leave a brief position paper or fact sheet with the member when you leave.

Follow up your visit with a thank you note.

How a Federal Bill Becomes a Law (Or Not)

Introduction

Anyone may draft a bill, but only members of Congress can introduce legislation, and by doing so become the sponsor(s). There are four basic types of legislation: bills, joint resolutions, concurrent resolutions, and simple resolutions. The official legislative process begins when a bill or resolution is numbered. H.R. signifies House Bill and S. a Senate Bill? Referred to a committee and printed by the Government Printing Office.

1. Referral to Committee,
With few exceptions, bills are referred to standing committees in the House or Senate according to carefully outlined procedural rules.
2. Committee Consideration
committees specialize in different areas, such as foreign relations or agriculture, and are made up of small groups of senators or representatives. When a bill reaches a committee it is placed on the committee's calendar. A bill can be referred to a subcommittee or considered by the committee as a whole. At this point the bill is carefully reviewed and its chances for passage are determined. If the committee does not act on a bill, it is the equivalent of killing it.
3. Subcommittee Review
bills are often referred to a sub committee for study and hearings. Hearings provide the

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opportunity to put on the record the views of the executive branch, experts, other public officials, supporters and opponents of the legislation.

4. Mark up:

after hearings are completed, the subcommittee may meet to “mark up” the bill, that is, make changes and amendments before they recommend the bill to the full committee. If a subcommittee votes not to report legislation to the full committee, the bill dies.

5. Committee Action to Report a Bill

after receiving a subcommittee’s report on a bill, the full committee can conduct further study and hearings, or it can vote on the subcommittee’s recommendations and any proposed amendments. The full committee then votes on its recommendation to the House or Senate. This procedure is referred to as “ordering a bill reported.”

6. Publication of Committee Report

once a bill has been reported, the committee chairman instructs staff to prepare a written report about the bill. This published report will include the purpose of the bill, its impact on existing laws, budgetary considerations, and any new taxes

or tax increases that will be required by the bill. Additionally, the report includes the position of the executive branch, as well as the views of dissenting members of the committee.

7. Floor Action Legislative Calendar

After a bill is reported back to the house of origin (House or Senate), it is placed in chronological order on the legislative calendar for “floor action” or debate before the full membership. In the house there are several different legislative calendars, and the Speaker and the majority leader largely determine if, when, and in what order bills come up. In the Senate there is only one legislative calendar.

8. Debate

Debate for and against the bill proceeds according to the rules of the House or Senate.

9. Voting

Once debate has ended and any amendments to the bill have been approved, the full membership will vote for or against the bill.

10. Bill Referred to Other Chamber

Bills approved by one chamber of Congress (House or Senate) are now sent to the other chamber where it usually follows the same route through committee and floor action. The chamber may approve the bill as received, reject it, ignore it or change it.

11. Conference Committee Action

If only minor changes are made to a bill by the other chamber, it is common for the legislation to go back to the first chamber for concurrence. However, if the second chamber changes a bill significantly, a “conference committee” made up of members of both chambers will be formed to reconcile the differences between the House and Senate versions. If the committee cannot agree the bill simply dies.

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If the committee does agree on a compromise version of the bill, a conference report is prepared describing the committee members.

12. Final Actions

After a bill has been approved by both the House and the Senate in identical form, it is sent to the President. If the President approves of the legislation he signs it and it becomes law. The President can also take no action on the bill for ten days while congress is in session and the bill will automatically become law. If the President opposes the bill, he can veto it. If the President takes no action on the bill for ten days after Congress has adjourned their second session, the bill dies. This action is called a “pocket veto”

13. Overriding a Veto

If the President vetoes a bill, Congress may attempt to “override the veto” This requires a two thirds roll call vote of the members who are present in sufficient numbers for a quorum.

How To Get Copies of Bills and Committee Reports

You can ask your legislators office to get you copies of bills and committee reports that you need, But it is faster to use THOMAS, the congressional website (<http://thomas.loc.gov>) . Identify the bill or committee report you want by name and number. In the house, Bills are identified as H.R. _____. In the Senate, they are identified as S._____.

Committee reports include the number of Congress in their number: House committee reports issued during the 109th congress will be identified as H.Rept.109-_____;Senate reports as S.Rept. 109-____ etc.

Writing Opinion Editorials and Letters to the Editor

An Opinion Editorial or (op-ed) is a timely, provocative essay that expresses an opinion on an important issue. Letters to the editor generally respond to a previous article in the Newspaper. They can be useful and cost effective tools for advocates trying to

get out a message. Most policy makers or their staff read these, as a way to track issues important to their constituents. Identify yourself. For example “I am a mother as well as a nurse in the public health system.” Be Brief. 750 words or less for an Opinion Editorial and 150 words or less for a letter to the editor . Plan your message. Choose just one. Avoid Jargon and check your facts. Use examples. Real life stories engage readers and can often make a point in far fewer words than a page of statistics. Make a specific recommendation. Include your name, address, phone number, any appropriate organizational affiliation, a one sentence description of that organization. However, you do not have to be writing on behalf of an organization to get published.

Most editors will respond to you within a week. They will call you to confirm you wrote the piece before they publish it. They may want to make some changes . Don’t get discouraged if they don’t print your article. Find out as much as you can about why your piece was not published. If you do get published, save the Clipping and send it to the policy makers to be sure they see it.

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