

Tips for Communicating With Congress

Letter Writing: Enhanced security measures have increased the amount of time it takes for a letter sent via USPS to reach the intended office. Therefore, e-mail and fax is the best way to quickly communicate in writing with a Congressional office.

Telephone Calls: Ask to speak with the staff person who handles the issue that you are calling about. If you are a constituent, identify yourself as such, and tell the staffer that you would like to leave a brief message for your Member. Include reasons for your support or opposition to a bill/issue, and do not hesitate to ask for a written response to your phone call.

Personal Visits: Meetings with Members or staff should be conducted as quickly as possible. Usually, you will have no more than 15-20 minutes to complete your visit. Therefore it is important that you plan your visit carefully.

- Always make an appointment, rather than simply drop in on an office. Explain to the scheduler what you would like to discuss at your meeting.
- Be on time, and be patient when a Member or staff person is running late.
- If possible, draw connections between what you are requesting and how it would benefit the Member's constituency.
- Offer to be of assistance to the Member or staff should they need additional information.
- Follow-up with a thank-you letter and include any additional information.

Generally, Members of Congress will be more receptive to your letters, phone calls or visits if you are one of their constituents.

The Legislative Process

The legislative process consists of several steps, all of which are opportunities for you to become engaged.

- *Introduction of Legislation:* While ideas for bills can come from anybody, only a Member of Congress can introduce legislation. All bills are assigned an identifying number. Legislation appropriating money must originate in the House.
- *Committee Action.* Once legislation is introduced, it is referred to the committee with jurisdiction over the issue. A bill may be sent to a single committee or several committees at once. It may also be sent from one committee to another, or different parts of a bill may be sent to different committees. Most of the work is handled at the committee level.
- *Subcommittee Action:* After it receives legislation, a committee usually will refer it to the proper subcommittee. Subcommittees are more narrowly focused than full committees. Three main steps occur at the subcommittee stage:



- Hearings
 - Markups-Committee members may suggest amendments, which do not necessarily have to be related to the subject of the overall bill at this stage.
 - Reporting Out -Once a markup is complete, a final draft of the legislation is voted on by the subcommittee for approval. If a majority supports the bill, it is reported out and the full committee will then go through the same consideration process.
- If the full committee approves a bill, it is reported out to the full House or Senate.
 - *Publication of Written Report* After a committee votes to report a bill, the Committee chair instructs the committee staff to prepare a report on the bill, describing the intent of the legislation, its impact on existing laws and programs, and views of any dissenting Members.
 - *Floor Action.* Legislation is placed on the House or Senate Calendar for debate by the full Chamber.
 - In the House, the Rules Committee sets the terms of debate.
 - The Senate places fewer limits on debate. Any Senator may filibuster for as long as he or she wishes. A filibuster may only be broken by invoking cloture, which requires 60 Senators to vote to end debate.
 - When Debate ends in either chamber, a vote takes place to approve or defeat a bill.
 - *Conference Committee:* Bills may originate in one chamber, and upon passage, move to the opposite chamber to repeat the approval process. Often, similar bills work their way through both the House and Senate at the same time, and both chambers must pass identical bills in order for the legislation to be sent to the President for approval. Therefore, the House and Senate will form a conference committee to reconcile any differences between their bills. Once differences are resolved and a conference report is generated, both chambers must once again to approve the legislation.
 - *Action by the President:* The President has four choices upon receiving legislation:
 - Sign the bill into law;
 - Veto the bill and send it back to Congress with suggestions for reconsideration;
 - Take no action while Congress is in session, and the bill will become law in ten days;
 - Take no action and let the bill die after Congress has adjourned for the session. This is called a pocket veto.
 - A two-thirds vote in both chambers is required to overturn a veto.

