

Citizen Advocacy



by

Lyle R. Krewson

Email: lylekrewson@mchsi.com

HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

IDEA — Anyone can propose an idea for a law, but only a legislator may ask the Legislative Service Bureau (LSB) to prepare a bill draft.

INTRODUCTION — The bill is filed with the Chief Clerk of the House, or the Secretary of the Senate and receives a file number (H.F. or S.F. and a number).

COMMITTEE — The bill is referred to a committee and the committee chairperson appoints a subcommittee to study the bill in detail. The standing committee studies and debates the bill and recommends "do pass" for consideration by the House, with or without amendment; refers to another committee; postpones indefinitely (kills it) ; or, sends it to the floor without recommendation.

DEBATE — A legislator is designated as floor manager, presents the bill to the chamber when the bill is called up for debate, the bill is discussed, amendments are presented and require a majority of those voting for adoption. With a constitutional majority, the bill passes and moves to the other chamber; if less than the majority votes for the bill, the bill fails and dies unless reconsidered.

CONFERENCE COMMITTEE — Conference committees are members of both the House and Senate and is appointed to consider the points of disagreement and reach a compromise that is presented to both houses. Neither chamber may amend a conference committee report.

ENROLLMENT — When both chambers have passed the bill in the same form, it is re-drafted to incorporate all amendments then is "enrolled" and sent to the Governor for signature.

GOVERNOR — All bills must be sent to the Governor for final approval. He has three courses of action: sign the bill; veto the bill and send it back to the legislature; or take no action. The legislature may pass the bill over the veto, if two-thirds of the members of each chamber vote to override the veto. If the Governor does not sign the bill and does not veto it, the bill becomes law within three days without his signature while the legislature is in session or within thirty days if the legislature has adjourned.

EFFECTIVE — After the bill has been handled by the Governor, it is sent to the Secretary of State and goes into effect July 1 of the year the bill is passed, unless another date is specified in the bill.

CODE OF IOWA — All laws are incorporated into the Code of Iowa.

Your Lawmakers Do Hear You

If you write a letter to your Representative or Senator, does it do any good? Yes, says a study published by the American University's Institute for Government Public Information Research.

According to the study, Congressional Representatives and Senators consider constituent mail and telephone calls to be "the most important kind of communication in developing positions on issues and legislation."

The 32-page report, entitled SPECIAL WASHINGTON REPORT: COMMUNICATIONS AND CONGRESS, was based on panel discussions and questionnaires given to 123 Congressional staffers. Participants were asked to rate 96 different types of communications according to how visible and effective they are in influencing Senators and Representatives. The top rankings were:

1. Spontaneous letters from constituents,
2. Telephone calls from constituents,
3. Reports from the Congressional Research Service,
4. Articles in the major daily newspapers,
5. Editorials in the major daily newspapers,
6. Visits from constituents,
7. Articles in district daily newspapers,
8. The Congressional Record,
9. Editorials in district daily newspapers,
10. Government publications.

While this study was surveyed and analyzed before the advent of email communication, and applied to Congress, the same can be applied to our knowledge of the state legislative process; and email would now rank in the top two or three. So, keep those emails, letters and calls coming! And don't ever underestimate the impact you can have!

Key Pressure Points in the Legislative Process

As a bill progresses through the House and Senate there are certain times when your action can have the greatest influence on the final result of the legislative proposal. These key pressure points on both sides of the General Assembly are:

- With the individual, group or agency who originates the idea for a bill.
- With the legislator who initiates the bill.
- With the Speaker of the House or President of the Senate who assigns the bill to a standing committee.
- With the committee chairperson who assigns the proposal to a three- or five-member subcommittee.
- With members of the subcommittee.
- With members of the full standing committee having jurisdiction over the bill.
- With the full House and Senate.
- With the Governor.

You will be alerted to action when your action will have the most effective impact in the process!

Ten Commandments Of Advocacy

- **Do Your Homework:** Learn as much as you can about the problem. Be able to explain how it affects you. Know the strengths and weaknesses of your opponents' arguments. Anticipate questions, and have the answers ready.
- **Start Early:** You have to be ready when the time comes and everything always takes longer than you think it will.
- **Tell the Truth:** Legislators rely on you for good information. You will never regain your credibility once you lose it. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. If you promise to find an answer, do it.
- **Keep It Simple:** Work from the KISS principle – Keep It Short and Simple. Think about what you want and why you want it. Legislators are busy people and appreciate a concise summary of what you want.
- **Take Your Friends Where You Find Them:** Find your friends and work with them. In politics, a friend is someone who helps you when you need help, whether a Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative. Never cut anyone off from contact; your opponent today may be your ally tomorrow.
- **Know Your Opponents:** Do not waste time trying to convince those who are publicly committed to their position. Put your energy into swaying undecided votes. However, keep lines of communication with your opponents open for possible compromises.
- **Think Big, But Always Know Your Bottom Line:** Always ask for more than you think you can get. The legislative process is one of compromise – legislators try to give everyone something. Have something you can give to your opponents without hurting you. This means you must prioritize. Decide what is most important and be willing to compromise on everything else.
- **Build Coalitions:** Work from a united front. Find groups and individuals who agree with you on an issue and work with them. Do not expect them to agree with you on every issue or expect the coalition to last forever. It does not matter who gets the credit as long as it gets done. Grabbing credit is divisive and gives your opponents something to exploit. Keep your problems to yourselves.
- **Work at the Local Level:** Legislators pay most attention to their constituents. Sometimes you can affect the key decision-makers directly, but more often it is best done through local contacts with legislators, media and allies.
- **Thank People Who Help:** Everybody appreciates a pat on the back!

How To Lobby Your Policymaker

Prior To Your Appointment:

- Make an appointment; explain to the secretary what you want to talk about and who will attend the meeting. Let her know how long you would like to talk to the legislator.
- Learn something about the legislator, such as political party, district, religion, occupation, leadership positions, and legislative committee assignments.
- Have an extra copy of the bill you will be speaking with the legislator about.
- Be on time, but do not be surprised if the legislator is not, especially during a session.

The Meeting:

- Introduce yourself and anyone with you.
- Address the legislator as "Senator" or "Representative."
- Be specific; stick to one bill or subject, mentioning the specific bill number; offer the legislator a copy of the bill and brief background material.
- Explain why you support or oppose the bill and why the legislator should do the same.
- Be persistent, but do not be angry or belligerent, and do not expect the legislator to be so.
- Make sure you understand the pros and cons of the bill; if possible, use examples, personalizing it to your own experience.
- Answer questions. Expect the legislator to ask some; if you do not have the answer, say so and offer to find the answer and provide it to the legislator later.
- If the legislator shares something in confidence, do not repeat it.
- Only take the time you were allotted.
- Focus conversation on the common ground between your position and the legislator's. Play to your strengths.
- Leave any materials you have, they should be brief.
- Be courteous throughout. Thank the legislator and his or her secretary.

After The Meeting:

- Write a report on your visit to your organization's Lobbyist or Director.
- Follow-up with a letter to the legislator outlining the major points covered. Thank him or her again and enclose any information promised or requested.

General Comments:

- Legislators have differing skills, interests and education. Each session they deal with hundreds of widely varying issues. Therefore, a legislator may not be personally knowledgeable about your specific bill or issue. That is why your contact is important. They need it!

- Legislators generally are receptive to their constituents and other visitors; they appreciate the information you have to offer.
- Your credibility establishes your relationship with a legislator. Make sure everything you present to the legislator is truthful and accurate.
- Provide information and persuade the legislator to vote favorably on your bill or issue. Do not make judgments or give your opinions on other matters.
- You may not be an expert on your issue. However, compared to the legislator, who has to deal with all those issues, you are a wealth of knowledge.
- Your visit may provide the legislator with the reason to vote favorably on a bill. Every visit has an impact. Since most people never visit, write or call their legislator, the legislator realizes that your time represents the interests of many absent constituents.

How To Call Your Policymaker

When the legislature is in session, you can call your legislators in Des Moines (during the week) or at home (on the weekend). Remember, the session generally runs from early January to late April or early May. Legislators do not have official district offices, in our state, so to reach them in your district, you must call them at home or their place of business.

Here are some tips for making telephone calls to your legislators:

- Identify yourself by name and address.
- Identify the bill you want to talk about by issue and number.
- Briefly state what your position is and how you would like your legislator to vote. Make it as succinct as possible, and show how it would effect you or the legislator's district.
- Ask for your legislator's view on the bill or issue; ask for a commitment to vote for your position. Do not argue. If the legislator takes a position opposite to yours, respect it.
- Offer to answer questions or supply any additional information. Send your information quickly, as the legislature moves rapidly during a session.
- Do not be abusive or do not threaten.
- If the legislature is in session, your call may have to be taken by a secretary or aide to the legislator. Give them the same information you would the legislator. Legislator's staff are very reliable and will relay your information to the legislator. Do not be surprised if the legislator calls you back later.
- Follow up the call with a note thanking the legislator (or staff) for their time. Use the note as an opportunity to briefly restate your position.

When the legislature is in session, your legislators may be reached through the following switchboard numbers (they do not have individual numbers):

House of Representatives – 515-281-3221

State Senate – 515-281-3371

How To Write/Email Your Policymaker

Letters and emails are important, even critical, to influence legislation. Persuasive written messages are effective, efficient, and timely. Emails should be written just as you would write or compose a letter. Here are some guidelines to follow in writing an effective letter or email:

- Be specific; stick to one bill or subject, mention the specific bill number, if possible.
- Explain why you support or oppose the bill and why the legislator should do the same. Show you know the pros and cons.
- Write in your own words and include thoughts of your own. Personal experience is the best evidence. Use examples.
- Be knowledgeable. Do not send a postcard or form letter. Handwritten letters are fine if legible.
- No apologies, for taking the legislator's time. Do not affect a "righteous" tone, as in --"As a citizen and taxpayer...".
- Be brief. One page, well-written, is better than two or more.
- Mention if you live in the legislator's district. They like to be responsive to their own constituents.
- Do not try to become the legislator's "pen pal." Pen pals can become nuisances.
- Write as an individual, concerned citizen. You are not part of a letter-writing campaign. REMEMBER, to include your name and address, especially important in an email.
- If you ask a legislator a question and do not receive a reply, follow up with another letter asking for a response. Credibility of letters is enhanced if a follow-up letter is sent when a first letter goes unacknowledged.
- When a legislator votes as you asked, send a Thank You. Legislators like thank-yous just as you do, and receive very few of them.

When the legislature is not in session, it is best to send letters to the legislator's home address. During the session, letters should be sent directly to the legislator in Des Moines. The legislator should be addressed and greeted using this format:

The Honorable (Full Name) (State Senator) (Representative) Home Address City, State ZIP	OR	The Honorable (Full Name) (State Senator) (Representative) State Capitol Des Moines, Iowa 50319
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Dear Mr., Mrs., or Ms. (Last Name): (for Representatives)
Dear Senator (Last Name): (for Senators)

Email addresses are constructed: `firstname.lastname@legis.state.ia.us`