

The Citizen Lobbyist



Making Your Voice Heard: How you can influence government decisions

Of the people, by the people, for the people.” Democracy is not a spectator sport. Acting as participants, rather than spectators, citizens do make a difference. This booklet will help put you in the game. Reach for it whenever you want to send a message to government decision-makers.

A publication of the League of Women Voters of New York State Education Foundation, Inc.



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The information in this booklet focuses on how to influence New York legislators—but many of the suggestions also apply to influencing other government officials. Whether they are elected or work in government agencies, and whether they are based in City Hall, Albany or Washington D.C.

LEGISLATORS ARE YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS: THEY WORK FOR YOU.

In today's world, no single legislator can be well informed on all the issues. During a typical New York legislative session, thousands of bills are introduced. Legislators count on ideas and information from constituents. This input frequently results in new or better laws. If you think a proposed law misses the mark or a new law is needed, don't keep it a secret.

ONE VOICE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Here's an example: The owner of a small business in New York complained to his legislator about a state paperwork requirement. Several months later, his legislator called to tell him that the State legislature had passed a law simplifying the requirement.

DO I HAVE TO BE AN EXPERT?

Legislators are particularly interested in how a bill will affect the people in their district. You may have an important perspective on an issue because of your job, your volunteer activities, your family or personal experience. Everyone is an expert on how policies affect their every-day lives. If you are an expert, share your information.

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO LOBBY?

The NYS legislature does most of its work between January and May, in what is known as the spring legislative session. For a simplified description of the legislative process, see the box, How an Idea Becomes a Law.

The best time to discuss general concerns or suggest new legislation is during the summer or fall when the legislature is not in session, or very early in the spring session. Once the State Legislature is in full session, legislators must focus on specific legislation.

Contact your legislators about specific legislation as early as possible in the legislative process, when they are most likely to be open-minded and when there is still time to make changes. However, until your legislator casts a final vote, it's not too late to make your views known. After legislation passes Senate and Assembly, you can urge the governor to sign or veto it. In the event the governor issues a veto, you can contact your legislator who may be able to negotiate changes that meet with his approval.

HOW AN IDEA BECOMES A LAW...

You don't have to be a state assemblymember, a senator, or even a governor to come up with an idea for a new law in New York. Anybody – you, me, your friends – can think up new ways to make New York a better place to live. Come up with a solution to a problem!

TELL YOUR LOCAL LAWMAKER ABOUT YOUR PROPOSAL...

Once you come up with your idea, call or write your local state legislator. They'll be happy to let you know if it is possible to make your idea into a law. Your proposed law's journey starts as a "bill" which is introduced in the legislature. Your bill can have many sponsors or it can have only one sponsor. No matter how many sponsors your bill may have, remember that all bills must pass both houses of the Legislature - the Assembly and the Senate in the same form.

A JOURNEY DOWN THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS...

Before it is passed by the Legislature, various committees — smaller groups of legislators — will examine and analyze your bill. Your bill usually must pass through these committees before the full Assembly or Senate can act on it. Once it is approved by the committees, it is put on a calendar so it can be voted on by the full membership of the Assembly or the Senate. In most cases in both the Senate and the Assembly, a bill needs at least half the members to vote “yes” for it to pass. There are times, however, when a bill needs more than half the members to vote “yes” for it to pass. Your bill must pass both the Assembly and the Senate before the Governor can consider it.

AN IDEA BECOMES LAW...

If your bill passes both the Assembly and the Senate, it is then delivered to the Governor for his or her signature. Once your bill is delivered to the Governor’s desk, it must be acted upon within 10 days. The Governor can sign the bill into law, or without taking any affirmative action allow the bill to become law without his signature, or he may veto (or reject) the bill. Should the Governor veto your bill, don’t give up! A veto can be overridden if at least 2/3 of the legislators in the Assembly and the Senate agree with your bill. Although a veto can be overridden, it is rare.

WHO DO I TELL?

Tell your elected representatives. The legislative power of the state of New York is vested in the State legislature, which consists of two chambers, the Assembly and the Senate. Senators are elected from 63 legislative districts. There are 150 members of the Assembly. All are elected in even number years and serve 2 years. To learn who your state senator and assemblypersons are, visit the League of Women Voters of New York State website (www.lwvny.org) and click on the “Take Action” link in the top right corner of our homepage. You can also call your county clerk’s office or the League of Women Voters of New York State at 518-465-4162 or email us at lwvny@lwvny.org. The governor and state agency heads also play a role in making and carrying out laws. It is sometimes useful to contact them as well.

HOW DO I GET MY POINT ACROSS?

Personal visits, writing, faxing, emailing or telephoning can all be effective. It is not necessary to go to the state capital in Albany or to call long distance. Legislators have offices in their home districts.

Common sense and practicalities are the best guides for how you choose to communicate. For example, if you have a lot of information to share, a written communication may be most effective. If time is of the essence, a phone call or email may be best. However, we have heard that it is better to fax your written communication than to email. When calling your legislator’s office, it is likely that you will speak to a staff member.

A first contact with a legislator or staff member can be the beginning of an ongoing, productive relationship. A thank you note when your legislator takes the action you requested, or just takes the time to meet or discuss an issue with you, helps to build a relationship. Even if you disagree with your legislator on one issue, you may be able to work together on another.

HOW TO “TALK” SO YOUR LEGISLATOR WILL LISTEN

- IDENTIFY yourself and give your home address when phoning or writing
- DESCRIBE the issue or bill that concerns you.
- Refer to the BILL NUMBER, if possible.
- Tell the legislator what ACTION you want.
- Mention any special CREDENTIALS you have.
- State key REASONS for your views
- Put a HUMAN FACE on the issue; share personal experiences.
- COUNTER ARGUMENTS the opposition is using, if you can.
- If you make a mistake, correct it immediately
- Limit writing to ONE ISSUE or one bill.
- Be BRIEF.
- Ask for a REPLY.
- Find out which legislators support your position and get commitment for action.
- Ask what you can do to further shared goals
- Be POLITE, keeping the door open for future communication.
- Send a THANK YOU or follow-up letter when appropriate.



ONE-MINUTE LOBBYING

When time is short, a telephone call is a quick and simple way to take action. When the receptionist answers, all you need to do is say who you are, where you live and why you are calling.

Receptionist: Good morning. Senator Joseph Smith’s office.
You: Hi. My name is Jane Q. Public and I live at 100 Main Street in Hometown.
Receptionist: May I help you?
You: I am calling to urge Senator Smith to vote for Senate Bill 550, which requires police to trace guns used by young people in committing crimes. I think firearm tracing is an important step in keeping guns out of the hands of children and reducing violent crimes.
Receptionist: I will let the senator know.
You: Thank you.
Receptionist: Good-bye.
You: Good-bye.

WRITING RIGHT

Here's a sample letter to a state assemblyperson that uses tips from the box, How To "TALK" So Your Legislator Will Listen. You can write to your state senator at NYS Senate, Albany New York 12247 or your assemblyperson at NYS Assembly, Albany, NY 12248 or the Governor at Executive Chamber, Albany, NY 12224.

IDENTIFY YOURSELF

Mr. John Q. Public
100 Main Street
Hometown, New York 12259

February 15, 2013

The Honorable Jane Doe
New York State Assembly
Albany, New York 12248

THE ASK

REFER TO AND DESCRIBE
THE BILL

Dear Ms. Doe,

I am writing to urge you to vote yes on _____ which requires local law enforcement officials to trace firearms used in crimes by anyone under the age of twenty-one.

HUMANIZE
ISSUE

As a lifelong resident of Hometown, I have seen many changes occur over the years. I no longer leave doors to the house or car unlocked. Nor do I let our young grandchildren go off on their own to the neighborhood park as I allowed their mother to do when she was growing up.

STATE
YOUR
REASONS

You don't have to be an expert in anything to know that children have no business carrying guns. This bill would help in prosecuting those who supply young people with guns. Some argue that the bill would make more work for local police, but tracing will give them more information about illegal gun trafficking and make it easier for them to do their jobs.

COUNTER
OPPOSITION

Please let me know your position on _____. Thank you for considering my views. Is there anything I can do to help this bill passed?

Sincerely,
John Q. Public

REQUEST A
REPLY

HOW DO I FIND OUT ABOUT CURRENT LEGISLATION?

Your legislator's *district* office can be a valuable resource. District *office* staff are usually happy to provide constituents with legislative information, including the key dates in the legislative schedule. They can help *you* identify the number of a bill, get a copy and an update on its status, and find out how legislators *voted*. Get to know the office staff. There are also phone numbers at the State Legislature you can call.

GETTING THE LATEST INFO

If you have internet access, visit the New York State Assembly website (www.assembly.state.ny.us) or the New York State Senate website (www.nysenate.gov) and click on "Bill Search" or "Legislation." You can search for bills by keyword, bill number, by sponsor, or by committee. Once you have found the bill, you can click on "action" to find the status of the bill.

BILLS AND BILL STATUS

You may obtain copies of bills in the Document Rooms, Room 204 of the LOB for the Assembly and near Room 210 for the Senate. They are also located near each Chamber in the Capitol.

For information about bills, amendments, resolutions, bill memoranda from sponsors, debate and hearing transcripts, committee assignments, committee agendas, attendance records, seating charts, roll call votes and public hearing minutes, you can contact:

Assembly Public Information Office
Room 202 LOB
Albany, New York 12248
(518) 455-4218

Senate Public Information Office
Room 214, LOB
Albany, New York 12247
(518) 455-3216

<http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/ils/legislature/legis.html>

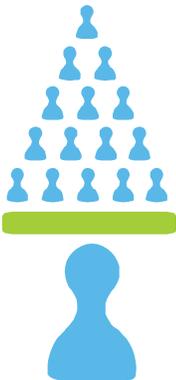
If you have a bill's number and wish to learn its status, call the Senate and Assembly Hotline (800) 342-9860 or look up the bill on the Assembly or Senate websites and click "action" to see its current status and its legislative history.

Calendars, agendas, roll calls and hearing schedules are also available on the Senate and Assembly websites (www.nysenate.gov & www.assembly.state.ny.us). Click on "calendar." Live coverage of legislative proceedings is also available via the Senate and Assembly Websites.

To put your organization on the list of organizations that receive forms upon which to comment on legislation awaiting the Governor's signature, call the Legislative Secretary at (518) 474-7182.

HOW CAN I HAVE MORE IMPACT?

There is strength in numbers. Reaching out to others is the best *way to* increase your lobbying power.



- Write a letter to the editor *of* your local *newspaper*
- Ask friends, neighbors and colleagues to *contact* their legislators.
- Join a group working on your issue.
- Exchange *views* with candidates.
- Get involved in an election campaign.
- Go to forums.
- Write an op-ed.

- Meet with an editorial board
- Join the League of Women Voters and attend League meetings. Find your local league on the League of Women Voters of New York State website (www.lwvny.org).

WHAT IF I DON'T SUCCEED?

Good Ideas can *take a while to show up* on the legislative *radar* screen.

Increasing legislators' awareness of an issue and establishing your own credibility *can* help lay the groundwork for future success. There is always a tomorrow!

YOUR STATE LEGISLATURE

In New York State there are three branches of government, the Legislative (comprised of the Senate and Assembly), the Executive (headed by the Governor), and the Judicial (the Courts). This brochure focuses on the Legislative branch and examines the process by which a bill becomes a law. At the heart of the legislative process is the means by which a bill becomes a law.

The Assembly, with its 150 members, and the Senate, with its 63 members, make up the New York State Legislature. Members of both houses are elected every two years.

In the Assembly, the member presiding over the legislative session is known as the Speaker. The Speaker is elected for a two year term by his colleagues. Presiding over the Senate is the Lieutenant Governor, but the person(s) whose work in the Senate most closely parallels that of the Speaker of the Assembly is the Majority Leader (During the 2013 legislative session, the senate has two Majority Leaders sharing power due to the 2-caucus-coalition majority formed this year). Some of the powers given to both the Speaker and the Majority Leader are the authority to create committees and to appoint legislators to serve on those committees, provide offices and staff for legislators, and, money for member items (when the budget allows).

The beginning of each legislative session is the first Wednesday after the first Monday of the New Year. Its opening is marked by the Governor's delivery of the "State of the State Message." This message outlines the priorities and the programs the Governor wants the legislature to address during the year ahead. The legislature attends session in Albany until its business for that year is concluded. While session usually ends in June, legislators can be called back to Albany for special legislative sessions, formal meetings, committee work or public hearings.

Want more help making your voice heard?
Contact the League of Women Voters of New York State
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Website: www.lwvny.org E-Mail: lwvny@lwvny.org

LEARN MORE

New York State Website
Senate
Assembly

www.ny.gov
www.nysenate.gov
www.assembly.state.ny.us

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