



American Legion Auxiliary

Legislative Advocacy Guide

Grassroots
Legislative Advocacy
Guide of the American
Legion Auxiliary



In the Spirit of Service Not Self
for Veterans, God and Country



Legislative Advocacy Guide

Revised 2013

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THE AMERICAN LEGION AUXILIARY AND ADVOCACY

In the spirit of Service Not Self, the mission of the American Legion Auxiliary is to support The American Legion and honor the sacrifice of those who serve by enhancing the lives of veterans, military and their families, both at home and abroad. For God and Country, we advocate for veterans, educate our citizens, mentor youth and promote patriotism, good citizenship, peace and security.

The American Legion Auxiliary advocates with, and on behalf of, veterans, the military and their families. Advocacy is defined as a constituent relaying his or her ideas and opinions to governmental officials. These include the President of the United States, United States senators and representatives, state governors and legislators, mayors, county commissioners, city council members, and personnel in governmental agencies. Advocacy succeeds when many individuals with the same goals and sentiments contact government officials and staff members to express their views. By virtue of our numbers, the more than 3 million members of The American Legion Family are a mighty force in providing for today's needs and working toward a better future for our veterans. Because the American Legion Auxiliary represents wives, mothers, daughters, granddaughters or sisters of a veteran, and women veterans, we bring a unique perspective and voice to the public policy process. Advocacy is not the responsibility of a few. It is the responsibility of all who care about our veterans and all Auxiliary members.

The American Legion Auxiliary has been and will continue to be a strong advocate for veterans and national security issues promoted and supported by The American Legion. Many bills pertaining to veterans benefits, military funding and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs funding are proposed every year. While we might not speak out about every bill introduced, ALA members must take the opportunity to make a difference for legislation of particular interest to the Legion Family.

The purpose of this Legislative Advocacy Guide is to help each Auxiliary member become a competent and informed advocate. It includes tips on gathering information on legislation, making legislative contacts, and building relationships with legislators and their staff at all levels of government.

AMERICAN LEGION AUXILIARY LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE

The American Legion Auxiliary's public policy activities are overseen by the National Legislative Committee, one of the ALA's mission outreach committees.

The purpose of the National Legislative Committee is to train and inform our members to become grassroots advocates for veterans and their families with local, state and national elected officials, supporting the legislative agenda, priorities and initiatives of The American Legion.

The National Legislative Committee, through its annual Plan of Action, recommends that ALA members take the following actions to advocate the Legion Family's public policy agenda:

- ★ Subscribe to the Legion's *Weekly Legislative Update* for a detailed report of current legislative activities of the Legion.
- ★ Subscribe to the Legion's Action e-List online legislative action system.
- ★ Communicate with Legion department and post legislative chairmen and request that the Auxiliary be included in Legion meetings with national, state and local officials, and be invited to Legion legislative briefings and other functions.
- ★ Write articles on the Legion's current legislative activities and publish them in ALA newsletters, websites and social media sites.
- ★ Schedule meetings with local-, state- and national-level officials to discuss issues facing veterans, military servicemembers and their families. If possible, attend meetings with other Legion Family members.
- ★ Identify Auxiliary members with personal or professional relationships with U.S. representatives, U.S. senators and/or their legislative staff members to nominate those members for addition to the Legion Legislative Council.
- ★ Organize informational sessions or workshops on advocacy fundamentals or Legion legislative priorities at department meetings and conventions.
 - ★ Legion legislative staff is authorized to travel to Auxiliary department functions by submitting a request to the national adjutant.

For further information on the Auxiliary's Legislative program, visit www.ALAforVeterans.org/Programs/Legislative or email legislative@ALAforVeterans.org.

LEARN OUR ISSUES

The American Legion Auxiliary supports the public policy positions of The American Legion. The American Legion regularly adopts and renews legislative intent resolutions. The resolutions reflect the will of the membership and serve as instructions to Legion officers and staff as to which legislative issues to monitor and what positions to take.

The American Legion publishes and disseminates a range of public policy material to communicate its public policy positions, including legislative intent resolutions, legislative priority sheets, legislative point papers and congressional testimonies. These materials are available at the Legion's Legislative Center at www.legion.org/legislative.

Legislative issues recurring for The American Legion Family include the following:

Veterans Program Funding

- ★ **Veterans Affairs Funding:** Provide adequate funding for programs and services of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- ★ **Housing and Urban Development Funding:** Provide adequate funding for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's permanent supportive housing program for homeless veterans (HUD-VASH).
- ★ **Labor Funding:** Provide adequate funding for the U.S. Department of Labor's veterans employment programs.
- ★ **State Veterans Homes:** Provide adequate funding for veterans long-term care facilities.

Veterans Healthcare

- ★ **Availability of Care:** Ensure modern and geographically distributed VA facilities.
- ★ **Quality of Care:** Monitor the quality of healthcare provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- ★ **Treatment for Women Veterans:** Ensure adequate and qualified staff and settings for treating women veterans.
- ★ **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; Traumatic Brain Injury; Military Sexual Trauma:** Improve veterans' access to mental health and substance use services, including services for PTSD, TBI and MST.
- ★ **Wounded Warrior Care:** Provide health and rehabilitation support for returning wounded servicemembers.

Veterans Disability

- ★ **VA Benefits Claims:** Eliminate the backlog in processing of claims for veterans benefits.
- ★ **Concurrent Receipt:** Eliminate the deduction of disabled veterans' disability pay from their military retirement pensions.
- ★ **Medical Record Sharing:** Expedite the implementation of an information system for electronic sharing of medical records between the U.S. Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs.

Veterans Education and Employment

- ★ **Education Benefits:** Ensure proper administration and veterans' utilization of VA education benefits.
- ★ **Credentialing:** Incentivize states to recognize education and skills gained during military service as sufficient for state occupational credentials.
- ★ **Federal Preference:** Monitor federal agency application of veteran preference in hiring and contracting.

Troops and Family Support

- ★ **Defense Funding:** Provide adequate funding for the nation's military operations, equipment, maintenance and facilities, servicemember pay and benefits and retiree healthcare.
- ★ **Housing:** Ensure the Basic Allowance for Housing keeps pace with housing costs.
- ★ **Transition Assistance:** Ensure opportunities for servicemember and family participating in pre-deployment, pre-separation and transition assistance briefings and services.

Americanism

- ★ **Flag Protection:** Seek constitutional amendment to allow Congress to protect the flag.
- ★ **Pledge of Allegiance:** Permit recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance at public events and in schools.
- ★ **Voting:** Encourage and enable people to vote.

IDENTIFY YOUR LEGISLATORS

Federal—Each of us is represented by two U.S. senators and one U.S. representative. To find your elected Congressional officials, visit www.senate.gov, www.house.gov or the Legion's CapWiz system at capwiz.com/legion/home. You can also call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 or toll-free at (877) 762-8762.

State—Each of us is represented by one or more state senators and one or more state representatives. To find your elected state officials, visit your state legislature’s website or call its switchboard. A list of state legislative bodies is available at thomas.loc.gov/home/state-legislatures.html.

Local—Each of us is represented by local elected officials for counties, cities or towns. To find your local elected officials, visit the websites or call the switchboards of your county government building, or city or town hall.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH LEGISLATORS

Are you acquainted with your elected officials? Do you know who they are? Their views? Many of us never meet or contact the people we elect to public office. As in any relationship, establishing open lines of communication takes time and persistence. We need to meet new people several times in order to become familiar and comfortable with them. The same is true of our elected officials: The legislative influence of the Auxiliary is based on relationships between members and their legislators, so it is important to work at building those relationships.

The best way to become acquainted with a legislator is through frequent, polite contact. Elected officials want and need to know the opinions of their constituents who elected them and will choose whether to re-elect them based on their performance in office. You do not need to meet with a legislator face to face to build a relationship. Most elected officials have local or regional offices and hold local meetings. Visiting their local offices and attending town hall-type meetings are the best ways to become acquainted with your elected officials. Writing letters, sending emails and faxes and making phone calls are the easiest ways to contact them.

Here are some steps to building relationships with legislators:

- ★ Subscribe to your legislators’ e-newsletters, or visit their websites frequently to keep informed on their activities and positions.
- ★ Monitor your legislators’ websites and check newspapers and leaflets at stores, schools and places of worship for announcements of town hall-type meetings. Attend the meetings, and be sure to ask a question or introduce yourself to the legislator at the conclusion of the event.
- ★ Invite lawmakers to Legion Family noteworthy events. Alert them when the Legion Family celebrates an outstanding accomplishment or receives an important position.
- ★ Invite your elected officials to address The American Legion Family at a department, district, county or unit meeting.

- ★ As legislative issues arise, contact your legislators to share the Legion Family's point of view. It is the responsibility of ALA advocates to represent the position of The American Legion.
- ★ Ask legislators how they plan to vote on an issue, and ask for their response in writing.
- ★ Send thank-you notes to compliment legislators on a job well done, a vote we supported, or on committee appointments received. Also, let your legislators know when we disagree with a vote they cast and politely ask why they voted that way.

COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR LEGISLATORS

You have the opportunity to communicate with your legislators using a variety of methods. These tips will make your communications effective when communicating with your legislator by letter, email, fax, email, phone or in person.

Letter Writing

Hand-signed and mailed letters are always appropriate but may not be fast. For example, letters sent to a congressional office using postal mail must go through a decontamination process, which can delay arrival by three weeks or longer.

- ★ **Type the letter:** Type your letter rather than writing it by hand.
- ★ **Clearly identify yourself:** Let the legislator know you are a constituent. Be sure to include your name and address on the letter itself, as the envelope could get lost. If you write to a lawmaker who does not represent your area, you probably will not receive a reply unless you make it clear why he or she should respond. For example, if you represent an organization or company that has members or does business in the legislator's district, include that information. It makes your opinion or viewpoint more relevant.
- ★ **Keep it short:** Try to keep your letter to one page or less, and focus on one subject. Summarize your position, or request in the first paragraph. Explain to your legislator why he or she should be concerned. The rest of the letter can explain and include supporting information.
- ★ **Be specific:** Ask your legislator to support or oppose a particular measure or take some other specific action. If possible, refer to the legislation by name and number, and summarize its intent.
- ★ **Cite facts:** Do not dilute your credibility by using arguments that cannot be substantiated. Do not be emotional or philosophical. Use justification gleaned from The American Legion's policy materials (www.legion.org/legislative). Two or three short and

specific facts are sufficient. Too many can lose your reader.

- ★ **Personalize your message:** Explain how a proposal will affect you, your family, community or organization.
- ★ **Be cordial:** Respect your legislator's right to have a different opinion. Offer to provide more information to support a change in opinion. Your goal is to build a relationship and keep the lines of communication open. An elected official who does not agree with you on one issue could be a strong ally on another.
- ★ **Thank your legislator:** Be sincere in thanking legislators for their time and attention. You might write: "Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter."
- ★ **Ask for a response to your letter:** If you would like a reply, request it in the letter and include your street address. If you do not hear from your legislator, follow up with a phone call.

Email

Most lawmakers publicize an email address for receiving constituent communications. Others use form-filled systems which require you to enter your information and subject matter into an online form. Visit your lawmakers' website to find their preference for receiving email communication. Follow the letter-writing instructions for preparing your email communications.

Fax

Some legislators have a fax number for public use. Fax a letter instead of postal mailing to shorten delivery time. Follow the letter-writing instructions for preparing your fax communications.

Phone Calls

Phone calls are effective when time is short, for example, just before an important vote. They might influence a legislator's last-minute decision about whether to support an issue.

- ★ **Before you call, put your facts together:** Know the name, number and sponsor of the bill in question. What specific section(s) of the bill concern you? How does the legislation affect you, your community or your organization? What alternatives can you suggest to make the legislation better? What action do you want your legislator to take?
- ★ **When you make the call, be courteous, brief and to the point:** Identify yourself as a constituent by giving your name, address and phone number. You do not need to speak directly to your legislator. It is fine to leave your message with the person answering the phone or with the staff person working on the issue. Present your facts and position. Tell the person what action you would like your legislator to take. Be polite. To ensure

your legislator receives the message, request a response in writing. Thank the person for listening to your request, and be prepared to answer questions. Do not forget to write down the name of the person who took your call.

- ★ **Follow up:** Find out how your legislator voted on the issue. If your legislator supported your views, be sure to thank him or her. If the legislator did not do what you asked, note your disappointment but say you want to continue working together. Never be rude, impolite or threatening.

In-Person Visits

A visit to legislators and staff requires planning.

- 1) **Make an appointment:** Contact the scheduler in your legislator's office to make an appointment. Requests must be made in writing. The legislator may be in session or hearings and unable to visit with you in person. Legislative assistants, however, are very knowledgeable and often specialize in a particular legislative area. Legislators depend on assistants to research information, weigh evidence and make recommendations. When you schedule the appointment, you will need to identify any topics you would like to discuss. A sample appointment request communication can be found in this guide.
- 2) **Be on time, and be flexible:** Legislators and staff assistants have tight schedules. If you arrive late, there may not be enough time to see the legislator or an assistant. Assume the legislator may be interrupted during your meeting. Also recognize that if a floor vote is called, the legislator will have to get to the Chamber quickly. You might be asked to wait, reschedule or have a walking meeting.
- 3) **Be brief and on point:** Time is very limited, so making your point concisely will be appreciated. Plan ahead. Write down the issue(s) you would like to address, state whether you are for or against a particular bill, and list two or three important points you would like to make. Use facts, not emotions, to make your points and bring the issues home.
- 4) **Ask your legislator for his or her stand on the issue:** Get a commitment if possible. Let legislators know what action you would like them to take. Are you asking for a vote for or against an issue? Would you like the legislator to speak for or against a bill on the floor? Does the legislator have a position or a contact on a particular committee, and is he or she willing to promote your position on that issue to that contact?
- 5) **Be polite:** Using good manners leaves the door open for productive future visits.
- 6) **Be gracious:** Thank legislators for taking time out of their busy

schedules to meet with you. This also is a great time to verify any commitment a legislator made regarding an issue you discussed.

- 7) **Exchange business cards:** This contact information will prove invaluable for future meetings and correspondence.
- 8) **Follow up:** Always follow up immediately with the person with whom you met to say thank you. Email is best; faxes are less effective. Handwritten notes will be respected but can take three weeks or more to arrive.

COMMUNICATE WITH LEGISLATIVE STAFF

Building rapport with a legislative staff member often is necessary to carry out an advocacy agenda. Legislators, especially on the national level, rely on staff to handle many constituent contacts. Also, legislators delegate staff members to represent them at public functions, so be sure to welcome the staff member warmly to events and ceremonies to which you had invited the legislator.

After you meet, a staff member likely will summarize your meeting in a memo to the legislator. If you present your legislator with a complex problem, he or she will probably ask for a staff recommendation before taking any action.

Depending on the level of government, some legislators may not have any staff support, particularly legislators holding part-time or part-year offices. Legislators with staff support assign a variety of duties to their staff. The positions listed here are typical for national-level legislators. At lower units of government, these roles may be combined into one or two staff members. Most congressional offices include the following staff positions:

- ★ **Chief of Staff:** This staff member directs the staff, follows local, state and national news — especially those with political implications, evaluates the political implications of legislative proposals and constituent requests, and oversees office operations. Your contact with this person may be limited.
- ★ **Scheduler:** This staff member keeps the legislator's appointment calendar. This individual is responsible for making travel arrangements and coordinating speaking dates, as well as constituent visits to the district and in-person meetings.
- ★ **Legislative Assistants (LA):** These staff members are issue specialists. Almost all congressional offices will have an LA covering Veterans Affairs. Get to know this person!
- ★ **Committee or Subcommittee Staff:** If a legislator has substantial seniority on a committee or subcommittee, his or her

work on issues for the panel might be handled by committee or subcommittee staff. They are experts on the issues they cover. These staff members will be responsive to legislators' constituents even though they do not work for a particular legislator.

- ★ **Director of the District or State Office:** This staff member is closest to constituents and is particularly sensitive to their concerns. Though principally concerned with local matters, the district or state director can be an excellent conduit for conveying your views on issues to a legislator. Also, getting to know the district or state director can be important in establishing a relationship with your legislator.
- ★ **Case and Project Workers:** These staff members respond to nonlegislative constituent concerns, including specific problems constituents have with government agencies or benefits.

REPORT YOUR RESULTS

Regardless of your method of communication with a legislator, it is important that you report the communication and results to the Legislative Committee chairman at Auxiliary levels (local, state or national) that correspond to the level of government of the legislator whom you contacted. For example, if you meet with your mayor, report that to the unit and department Legislative chairmen. If you meet with or receive a letter from your Congressional representative, report that to the national Legislative chairman and CC your department Legislative chairman.

Report information including the name of the legislator and office held, the topics covered, the legislator's response or commitments, and whether any follow-up by a Legion chairman or staff member is warranted.

ALA members, along with all members of the Legion Family, should report results of in-person meetings with U.S. elected officials or their staff members directly to the Legion's Legislative Commission using the online Congressional Report Form at www.legion.org/legislative/aar. This form asks for the names of everyone in attendance, the outcomes and your personal observations of the meeting, and any follow-up actions recommended with the legislator or his or her staff.

SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS TO LEGISLATORS

Sample Letter

Sender's Name
Address
City, State ZIP

Date

Senator [FirstName LastName]
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator [LastName],

As a constituent from [hometown] and member of the American Legion Auxiliary — the world's largest women's patriotic service organization at nearly 800,000 members — I thank you for your continued support and sponsorship of the U.S. Flag Protection Amendment, S. Res. [###]. Please urge your fellow senators to bring the bill to the floor.

The time has come for Congress to move beyond more than a decade of rhetoric about patriotism. As you may recall, all 50 states have officially requested that Congress pass legislation to allow the states to vote on a constitutional amendment to protect our U.S. flag. Congress should acknowledge the will of the states and pass S. Res. [###].

Thank you for your service to our country and for your service to us in [state]. I request a response to this correspondence.

Respectfully,

[Signature]
American Legion Auxiliary, [State] Unit [##]

cc: American Legion Auxiliary Department of [State] Legislative Chairman

SAMPLE MEETING REQUEST

Coversheet format to fax or email meeting requests.

TO: Attention: Scheduler
The Honorable [FirstName] [LastName]

FAX: XXX-XXX-XXXX

PGS: 1

SENT BY:
[Your name and email address]
[Unit or department position (if you are serving in one)]
[Unit [##], American Legion Auxiliary]

SENDER'S PH:
000-000-0000 [work]
000-000-0000 [cell or home]

RE: Meeting Request for [Week/Day], [Month ##, 201#]

DATE: [Month ##, 201#]

Please accept this [fax/email] as a meeting request with the [representative/senator] for about 20 minutes on [Week/Day], [Month ##, 201#], for me and [name(s) of others joining you]. Our schedule is flexible and open between [XX] and [XX]. Would the [representative/senator] have some time available?

We are constituents of the great state of [state]. I am active in Unit [##] in [city, state] and am currently [American Legion Auxiliary position]. [Name(s) of others joining you] is/are active in Unit [##] in [city, state] and is/are [American Legion Auxiliary position].

The American Legion Auxiliary is the world's largest women's patriotic service organization with nearly 800,000 members in some 9,000 communities. Our mission is to serve veterans, the military and their families.

Your assistance in coordinating a meeting time for us is appreciated. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

www.ALAforVeterans.org/Programs/Legislative

Find this legislative advocacy guide and information on the National Legislative Committee page of the ALA website.

www.legion.org/legislative

Sign up for Legion email Action Alerts. Find The American Legion's public policy materials. Locate bill sponsors and co-sponsors.

U.S. Capitol Switchboard

(202) 224-3121 or toll-free at (877) 762-8762

www.senate.gov

View contact information and websites of U.S. senators. Find links to Senate committees and their information on legislation, issues and committee hearings. Check the calendar for legislation being considered on the Senate floor.

www.house.gov

View contact information and websites of U.S. representatives. Find links to House committees and their information on legislation, issues and committee hearings. Check the calendar for legislation being considered on the House floor.

thomas.loc.gov

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

www.whitehouse.gov

White House

www.supremecourtus.gov

Supreme Court

www.c-span.org

Get updates on congressional activities, voting schedules and the congressional calendar.

American Legion Auxiliary Mission:

In the spirit of service, not self, the mission of the American Legion Auxiliary is to support The American Legion and to honor the sacrifice of those who serve by enhancing the lives of our veterans, military, and their families, both at home and abroad.

For God and Country, we advocate for veterans, educate our citizens, mentor youth, and promote patriotism, good citizenship, peace and security.



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