

# CAPITOL HILL 101



## **What is the Definition of Grassroots Lobbying?**

In the news, we hear about professional lobbyists who attempt to influence legislation and policy through various means. Grassroots lobbying is when everyday citizens contact their legislators to influence legislation and policy. Advocacy groups of all kinds engage in grassroots lobbying, inviting people to call and write their legislators when appropriate. Anyone can pick up the phone and ask their senator to support or oppose a pending bill.

## **Why Should I contact My Legislators?**

It's important to let your legislators know where you stand on a bill, because the number of letters on each side of an issue will frequently influence how a legislator will vote. Grassroots lobbying is very effective because the legislators are hearing directly from their constituency, who will be voting when the legislator seeks re-election.

## **How Do I Contact Legislators?**

In the past a hand-written letter was most effective. However, for security purposes, all letters to the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives are now pre-screened before being delivered to congressional offices, which means that all letters are delayed.

A “bill” is a proposed law, and thousands are written and introduced every year. Congressional bills fall into several categories: A proposed law will be titled S. or H.R., meaning simply ‘Senate’ or ‘House of Representatives.’ An official statement of the House or Senate which does not have the force of law is called a Resolution, and is often referred to as H. Res. Or S. Res. Resolutions have no legal force and are used to send a message that the Congress of the United States is concerned about an issue or applauds good works. Treaties, nominations, etc. will not have a numeric designation.

The text of bills can be written by Congressmen, their staff, committee staff, special interests groups, the White House, and even by civic activists like yourself. It then is reviewed by lawyers and policy experts, and regardless of who wrote it, a Congressman or Senator will then submit it in his name as the sponsor. Often a bill is submitted with the names of additional supporters, known as ‘cosponsors,’ and the more cosponsors a bill has (at the start or who sign on later), the more regard the bill is given – particularly is a majority of members have signed onto the bill. Once reviewed and ready for submission, a bill is simply put in “the hopper” (just a box) and then it is given a sequential number such as H.R. 1234.

After a bill has been introduced, it will be sent to a subcommittee which specializes in the subject of the bill. The most effective actions at the time are: gaining support in the subcommittee, to get the bill scheduled for a subcommittee vote, and to gather additional cosponsors. Or alerting Members that a bad bill should not receive hearing, gain cosponsors or be voted upon. Asking members not on the committee to simply vote for/against it is premature, as no vote will take place or even be scheduled until it has survived subcommittee and committee votes, so the better request would be to ask him or her to cosponsor the bill and get their colleagues to cosponsor it as well. Once the subcommittee has voted, the bill may advance to the committee. Then support much be built for a full committee vote.

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HOW DOES A BILL BECOME A LAW?

The bill will be scheduled for a vote by the entire House or Senate, if it passes at the level of committee. Various rules and deals can result in little or no debate on bills, and in the Senate, “filibusters” (unlimited debate, sometimes lasting several hours to several days) are sometimes used to delay or prevent bills from passing.

The chairman of a subcommittee or committee has great power to push a bill or prevent a vote from taking place. You may hear a bill will “die in committee,” meaning it has no support, or, that the chairman will not put it to a vote (or even debate) because he opposes the bill and is afraid it might pass.

Once passes by both houses, a “Conference Committee” of several Representatives and Senators will be selected to work out any differences between the Senate and House versions, and only after both houses have approved the same language will the final version be presented to the President for his signature or veto.



Would you like to schedule a personalized group session of Capitol Hill 101 for your church, school, or community group?  
Please contact us at [info@marchforlife.org](mailto:info@marchforlife.org).

Visiting your Members of Congress, or their staff, face-to-face is the most effective way to influence them. Individuals and groups can arrange personal meetings with Senators and Representative either in their Washington offices, or in their local offices at various times during the year. To find out when your Senator or Representative will be in their local office, you can: call their local office, check their web site or get on their mailing list. Whether you arrange to meet with your elected officials in Washington or their local offices, here are some rules to follow:

### **Prepare for the Meeting**

- Plan to discuss no more than two issues. Meetings are scheduled to last from 15- to 45-minutes.
- If you have any supporting handouts, charts or graphics, bring them with you. Consider taking extra copies in case staff members request them.
- Find out where your legislator stands and has voted on your issue. Many pro-life groups, such as Americans United for Life, Concerned Women for America, Family Research Council and National Right to Life have excellent scorecards.

### **At the Meeting**

- Arrive about 10 minutes before the appointment time. At least, be on time. Dress neatly and conservatively. Be courteous and respectful. Relax.
- Do not be upset if you end up meeting with the legislator's staff. They are often more knowledgeable of individual issues than the legislators themselves, and they WILL inform the legislator of your views and requests.

- Introduce yourself to the legislator or their staff members: tell them who you are and where you live. Warm them up: Try to start by complimenting something the legislator has done recently; their vote on an issue, a bill they sponsored, etc. After a minute or two of such “small talk,” state your standpoint the issue(s) you came to discuss. No matter how passionately you feel about the issue, do not “rant-and-rave.” Nothing diminishes your credibility more than an “in your face” demeanor. Tip: They know you pay their salary.
- Be ready to answer questions and discuss your points in detail.
- If the legislator disagrees with you, stand up for yourself, debate the issues, but do not become over-argumentative. Keep trying to emphasize the positives of your standpoint. Always try to end the conversation on a positive note.

### **After the Meeting**

Always send a follow-up letter or email thanking your legislator or staff members. Also include any additional information you may have offered to provide in support of your issue. The follow-up message is important, because it confirms your commitment to your cause and helps build a valuable relationship between you and your representative.

- **Chief of Staff (CoS) or Administrative Assistant (AA):** One of the few staff who report directly to the member, the CoS is often the senior political advisor to the Congressman, and may be the office manager as well (this may be the person to talk to if you are looking for a job in their office). Unless you are a campaign donor, friend, or otherwise well-connected (or a job seeker) you will not likely meet with the CoS on grassroots legislative matters.
- **Scheduler/Appointment Secretary/Personal Secretary:** Handles all aspects of the member's schedule, who he or she will and won't see, constituent visits, speaking engagements, etc. If you are visiting Washington, talk to the scheduler to see if you can arrange a meeting with the Congressman.
- **Press Secretary:** Handles all media activities, sets up news conferences, writes news releases, works to get the Congressman on TV and radio shows, cultivates a friendship with the media, answers media questions, preps the Congressman to give the right answers, etc.
- **Legislative Director (LD):** The LD is the senior Legislative Assistant; and oversees the Las and their assignments and takes a senior role in advising and writing legislation.
- **Legislative Assistant (LA):** Each office has a few "Las", each specializing in difference issues. They write legislation – and work with the committees, the White House, Federal agencies, lobbyists and special interests groups who have written legislation for them; advise their member or the LD on pending legislation, etc. The report to the LD.

*IMPORTANT: The "LA" who handles the issue you are concerned with is the person you should talk to, not the receptionist. Call the office and ask: "Who is the LA who handles [your issue]?", then talk to that person and request that they discuss the issue and your views with the Congressman. Have something of interest (facts, debate points, news, ideas) to tell the LA, not just "tell the Congressman to vote no." Follow up with a brief letter or fax – ask for their email address. If possible, schedule a visit. The LA can also tell you if the member is planning to vote for or against a particular bill – or if he is undecided. Those who are undecided are those you want to give the most lobbying.*



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### THE KEY STAFF POSITIONS IN A CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE

- **Committee and Subcommittee Staff:** Each committee and subcommittee have their own legislative staff, and more than member's own staff, they are more involved in drafting legislation and holding hearings. They are valuable to talk with or meet to discuss legislation, but not for the purpose of asking a member to vote for/against a bill.
- **Receptionist:** When you call and just ask that the Congressman support or oppose a bill, the receptionist will usually be the one who assists you. But the receptionist will just add your opinion to a list showing that X number of people called in favor and X against an issue. For greater influence, talk to the LA handling your issue as described above.
- **District Staff:** Members have one or more offices in their district or state, staffed by a few people. These staff are often easy to arrange to meet with (and you won't have to travel far!), and be sure to ask them to have the member write you a reply as a confirmation that the staff reported the meeting to the member. District offices receive fewer phone calls so targeting such offices for calls will make a greater impression (positively or negatively) than calls to their U.S. Capitol office.
- **Caseworker:** Works with constituents to solve problem with federal (not state/local) agencies as Social Security, Medicare, etc. The caseworker usually works at the Congressman's district office. Sometimes a call or letter from a Congressman's office can get action where your efforts have failed.



- **Legislative Correspondent (LC):** Answers constituent letters, faxes and emails. The LC will usually prepare for the Congressman a periodic summary of how many letters, faxes and emails are for and against each issue. Most offices do not reply to out of state/district mail and email, unless you are writing as a representative of an organization or company or if you are a donor or other supporter. Always ask for a reply if you want one and expect that most replies will be from letters.

**“Personnel is policy.”** You may find that many staff have different political views than their Congressman or Senator, thus a good conservative representative can be somewhat neutralized in his effectiveness on life issues by having staff who are not loyal to his philosophy. Lobbyists and advocates for big government also seek to befriend representatives and their top staff to convince them that “business-as-usual,” more spending, taxes, pork projects, special laws and exemptions, and campaign donations are the way to go. That makes YOUR job as a citizen lobbyist all the more important to overcome these layers of protection and often false information.

Text **MARCH** to **73075**



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