



The Citizen Lobbyist

*Making Your Voice Heard:
How you can influence government decisions*

League of Women Voters of Massachusetts
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The Citizen Lobbyist

The League of Women Voters has played a key role in influencing national, state, and local government policy since the League's founding in 1920.

Here in Massachusetts, the state League advocates for our legislative priorities on Beacon Hill. As a grassroots organization, we depend on our members to act as CITIZEN LOBBYISTS to make our voice heard on important issues of public policy.



LWV Arlington attends Day on the Hill to lobby the state legislature.

This booklet is designed to provide you with information and tools you need to be an active and effective CITIZEN LOBBYIST.

Although the focus is on how to influence the legislative process in Massachusetts, our suggestions also apply to influencing other government officials, whether they are elected or work in government agencies, and whether they are based in your city or town hall, on Beacon Hill, or in Washington, D.C.

WHY LOBBY?

Lobbying is the act of talking to elected officials about the merits of your position. Your goal is to influence their position through your knowledge of the issues.

As an organization devoted to encouraging informed and active participation in government, the League aims to ensure that the voice of the people is heard.

Paid lobbyists and special interests aggressively seek to influence public policy, but the same message has a different impact coming from the grassroots.

Lobbying by League members provides our legislators with direct access to information about how particular proposed legislation might affect their constituents – the people who live, work and vote in their districts.

League members have a unique opportunity to educate our elected officials and fellow citizens because of our reputation for being non-partisan, well-informed, and coming to our positions through open-minded, careful study and the consensus of our members.

As citizens, we may advocate on any issue of importance to us.

However, if you are lobbying as a member of the League, and identify yourself as such, your lobbying must reflect the positions of the League.

It is always important that the League speaks with One Voice. When in doubt about the League's position on an issue or piece of legislation, contact a member of your local and/or state Board.

First Steps

Your effectiveness as a CITIZEN LOBBYIST will depend on your preparation. The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts (LWVMA) is here to support you. Here are our suggested first steps for influencing the legislative process:

GET TO KNOW YOUR STATE LEGISLATORS

We urge you to get to know your state Senator and Representative, including committees they serve on and bills they are sponsoring and co-sponsoring. This information is available at <https://malegislature.gov/>. Under “Find Your Legislator,” enter your street address. If you do not have Internet access, please call the LWVMA office at 617-523-2999 for help.

There are multiple ways to start to build a relationship with your legislators:

- **Attend LWVMA’s annual lobby day, Day on the Hill, or a bill-specific lobby day.** You should pre-arrange meetings with your legislators.
- **Arrange a meeting between your local League and legislators.** Consider making a “legislative breakfast or coffee” a yearly event for your local League.
- **Invite legislators to your local League’s events,** such as forums and celebrations.
- **Give your legislators an opportunity to recognize your local League** with a citation for a special event such as an anniversary or other celebration by informing them in advance.
- **Attend your legislators’ in-district office hours or open district meetings.**

LEARN ABOUT LWVMA’S LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

To learn about the bills that LWVMA supports or opposes, go to the LWVMA homepage, www.lwvma.org, and click on the LWVMA Advocacy tab. A drop-down list will identify all of the bills LWVMA supports or opposes, as well as any testimony that has been submitted.

To find the status of a bill and its history, go to <https://malegislature.gov/> and type the bill number or name into the search box.

LWVMA’s [Legislative Action Committee](#) (LAC) is composed of League members who act as specialists in specific policy areas. These specialists review bills and decide, with LWVMA board oversight, which bills the League will support or oppose, based on the League’s stated positions on issues, which have been arrived at through consensus. (State positions are contained in [Where We Stand](#); national positions are contained in [Impact on Issues](#).) The specialists also testify before legislative committees, urge member support of legislation, and work with other organizations in coalitions to pass certain bills. Have questions about legislation we support or oppose? Call the LWVMA office at 617-523-2999 or email the Legislative Action Committee at specialists@lwvma.org.

UNDERSTAND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The Massachusetts legislature, or General Court, is the primary author of laws enacted in Massachusetts. It is a two-chambered body; the Senate has 40 members and the House of Representatives has 160 members, all of whom are elected to concurrent two-year terms.

Each two-year legislative session begins on the first Wednesday in January of an odd year and ends on the day before the beginning of the next session. Most of the active work on legislation, however, is completed by the last day in July of the even year.

Most legislation is submitted to the House or Senate Clerk's office on or before 5:00 pm on a specified date in January. Any citizen may submit a proposal to a legislator and request his/her support in submitting it as a bill. In the weeks prior to filing, caucuses are held where sponsors seek other legislators to co-sponsor their bills.

Bills are given House or Senate numbers, assigned to a joint committee, and sent to the non-initiating chamber for agreement and committee assignment. Once a bill is submitted to a joint committee, that committee must hold a public hearing on the bill; interested parties may attend and submit oral and/or written testimony. Most bills must be reported out of joint committees by a deadline, set by the legislature, early in the second year of the session to remain active in that session.



LWV Newton meets with legislators at the Massachusetts State House.

Following the public hearing, the committee will deliberate in Executive Session and make its recommendation to the body that initiated the bill. Their options are: 1) ought to pass; 2) ought not to pass; 3) ought to pass as changed; 4) discharge to another committee; 5) refer for a study order. (A study order authorizes the committee to create a subcommittee to study the bill during recess and file a report on its findings, but this is often a quiet way to kill a bill.) Frequently the bill number will change during this process and subsequent deliberations.

Once a bill is out of the joint committee, a series of reviews by House and/or Senate committees occurs. Bills can be held up or die in these committees, particularly Ways and Means. With a positive vote ("passed to be engrossed"), the bill is sent to the non-initiating body. The non-initiating chamber places the bill on its calendar to be discussed and voted on. Both chambers must deliver a positive vote on the same bill. If the second chamber alters the initiating chamber's bill, a conference committee is formed to work out a bill both branches will adopt.

Once both branches have "passed to be engrossed" the identical bill, it is sent to the Engrossing Division for the official printing. The bill is then sent first to the House and then the Senate for enactment. The engrossed bill may be debated and rejected (but not amended) in either chamber, but this is usually just a formality.

The final step is signature or veto by the governor. A two-thirds vote of both houses of the legislature is required to override a gubernatorial veto.

How Do You Get Your Point Across?

Personal visits, writing letters, e-mailing, or telephoning can all be effective. It is not necessary to go to the State House in Boston. Legislators have offices in their home districts.

Common sense and practical considerations are the best guides for how you communicate. Your legislator's staff may also be to give you some guidance. 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. 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.

ONE-MINUTE LOBBYING

When time is short, a telephone call to your legislator's office is a quick and simple way to take action. All you need to do is say who you are, where you live and why you are calling.

Receptionist: Good morning. Senator Joan 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 toward reducing violent crimes.

Receptionist: I will let the senator know.

You: Thank you. Good-bye.

Receptionist: Good-bye.

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.

How Can You Have More Impact?

There is strength in numbers.

Reaching out to others is the best way to increase your lobbying power. You can:

- 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 educational forums.
- Organize an educational forum.
- Write an op-ed.
- Meet with an editorial board.
- Attend lobby days and rallies.

What if I Don't Succeed?

Good ideas can take a while to show up on the legislative radar.

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

HOW TO WRITE RIGHT!

Emails, letters, and faxes are the most widely used forms of communication and are important to elected officials and their staff. All elected officials are accessible by fax and email, and the number of contacts on a particular subject may determine an official's attention to an issue, as well as the position taken. Focus on contacting your own legislators; communication from constituents is more important than communications from people outside their district.

When you write to elected officials, please remember to:

- Address only one issue per document.
- Include a succinct and relevant subject line.
- Add your contact information (street address, email address and phone number).
- Refer to and describe the bill.
- Be clear about what you are asking for.
- State your reasons for your position.
- Humanize the issue.
- Thank the legislator for his or her attention to the matter.

Remember to use official titles in both letters and emails:

- A letter should be addressed formally (e.g., The Honorable John Smith, title and official address).
- Emails should start: Dear Senator, Representative, Governor, Mayor, Councilwoman, etc.

Form letters may be the least effective communication, but they do save time and express your views. Most online form letters offer the opportunity to alter the message in order to make it more personal, so take the time when you can.

And all communications, particularly from constituents, form letter or otherwise, are counted. Expect to get a form letter in response to your written communication.

About Us

Since its founding in 1920, the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts has been a respected and trusted voice for citizen participation in our democracy. With 44 local Leagues throughout the state, LVWMA has been at the forefront of efforts to empower and educate Massachusetts voters and effect change on a wide range of issues, including election laws and campaign finance, natural resources and the environment, women's health, children's issues, state budget and finances, public education, and criminal justice reform. Membership in the League is open to men and women of all ages.

www.lvwma.org.

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