*“Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” – Frederick Douglass*

*“If you’re not hopeful and optimistic, then you just give up. You have to take the long hard look  
and just believe that if you’re consistent, you will succeed.” – Rep. John Lewis*

**Making Government Work For You**

**A. Six basic tips**

1. **Phone calls speak louder than emails or letters.** While a pile of post cards may look impressive, a ringing phone has to be dealt with right now, and a phone that rings all day is impossible to ignore. That said, an email is easy to send and better than nothing. Mass media – such as tweets, Facebook posts, online petitions, and mass emails – may be totally ignored.
2. **If you’re phone-phobic, write a short script that makes your point in a sentence or two.** Include your name, where you live, and the fact that you’re a constituent. Most calls end up recorded as a check-mark in a tally of how many people are saying what, so don’t fret over the wording. All you need to do is make your point clearly and politely.
3. **In-person meetings are best.** Share your personal story about why you care about an issue. You don’t have to be an expert in order to talk about your values and your concerns. If you want to, bring someone who knows more than you do about the issue or has been directly impacted by it. But just getting to know your legislator, and letting them know that you care about an issue, is enough.
4. **Tell your legislator what action or outcome you want.** Be specific. Ask for a response, so they know they need to get back to you.
5. **Call your own representatives, not someone else’s.** With a few exceptions, legislators generally listen to the people in their district and ignore everyone else. If you want to influence a legislator who isn’t yours, consider these options: (1) Call your legislator of the same type (House or Senate, state or federal) and ask them to speak with their colleague. (2) Do you have any friends, family members, or acquaintances in the district of the legislator you want to influence? If so, call them, explain the issue, and ask them to call their legislator to talk about it.
6. **Be polite.** Respectful language, in writing and speech, will help establish and maintain your credibility. Also, don’t bug your legislators about things they don’t have any control over. Remember they are people too, with lots of claims on their time and attention.

**B. Some ways to get to know your State Representative and Senator**

1. If you don’t know who your State Representative and Senator are, look them up at <https://malegislature.gov/Search/FindMyLegislator> .
2. Put their phone numbers in your cellphone.
3. Sign up for their email lists, if they have them, so you know what they’re thinking and doing.
4. Read their website and/or other articles about them online. What is their background? What do they care about?
5. Attend events where they are speaking. You might ask a question or talk with them before or after they talk. Even if not, you’ll get an in-person sense of who they are.
6. Go to their office hours in your community. Look for the dates on their website or email list, or in your local newspaper.
7. Set up a meeting with them or their aide at the State House. Ask about their opinions and perspectives, in addition to telling them about yours.
8. Introduce them to people directly affected by an issue. You can make hidden constituencies more visible.
9. Call them to discuss an issue you care about.
10. Invite them speak at an event your group is hosting.
11. Invite them to come to an event with speakers you’d like them to hear.

**C. How your legislators can support a bill**

1. Each bill needs a legislative sponsor – someone who files the bill and takes responsibility for shepherding it through the House or the Senate. Since sponsorship takes time and political capital, legislators need to be selective about how many and which bills they sponsor.
2. Legislators can cosponsor as many bills as they want. Cosponsorship basically just means that the legislator is going on record as supporting a bill. The more cosponsors a bill has, the more credibility it has. You can find out whether your legislator is cosponsoring a bill at <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/Search> – use a keyword or the bill number.
3. Legislators can indicate stronger support for a bill by telling the relevant committee chair that they want it to move this session and/or by telling the Speaker of the House or Senate President that they want a vote this session.
4. Legislators can testify at a committee hearing or speak to the press.
5. And of course they can vote for a bill – but only if it comes to a vote, which most bills don’t.

**D. Other ways you or your organization can support an issue**

1. Write letters to the editor in your local paper or statewide papers.
2. Meet with the editor of your local newspaper to inform them about the issue.
3. Show up at committee hearings at the State House. See the calendar at <https://malegislature.gov/Events/Hearings> .
4. Testify at a committee hearing, either as an individual or representing an organization.
5. Hold informational events, with a film, speaker, or panel. Invite your legislators.
6. Get informed and become a resource for your legislator.
7. Be in it for the long haul.

**E. A few useful references**

Want some more suggestions about how to talk and write so legislators will listen*?* Read Miriam Stein’s short book, *Make Your Voice Matter with Lawmakers: No Experience Necessary*. Or download “The Citizen Lobbyist – Making Your Voice Heard: How to Influence Government Decisions,” by the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts: lwvma.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Citizen-Lobbyist-LWVMA.FINAL\_.pdf

Want to understand the process by which laws are made in Massachusetts? Download the UU Mass Action guide: www.uumassaction.org/uuma/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/How-Laws-Are-Made-in-MA-Final.pdf

*This handout was prepared by Colleen Kirby, criminal justice legislative specialist for the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts and member of the Mass Incarceration Working Group of the First Parish Unitarian Universalist of Arlington,  
and Lori Kenschaft, Coordinator of First Parish Arlington’s Mass Incarceration Working Group. September 18, 2017.*