

Tips for Talking with Your Legislators

There are three basic ways to communicate your point of view to your legislator: by letter/email, by phone or by visit. The personal visit is probably the most effective method, particularly if your legislator knows you or is familiar with the group or organization you represent.

Personal Visit One of the most effective ways to “lobby” legislators is a face-to-face visit. Many legislators have offices within their home districts and make time available for meetings with constituents. All legislators have offices at the Capitol, although it is difficult for them to make and keep appointments during the session because of the hectic pace. Most legislators, however, will find a way to meet with constituents who have traveled to the Capitol.

It is a good idea to visit your legislator in small groups – no more than 3 or 4 – and to keep your visit as brief as you can. Be sure that your legislator knows that you are a constituent. If you have family, social, business or political ties, mentioning them may help you make a strong connection with your legislator. Let your legislator know if you are working with a coalition on the issue, or if you are representing members of your organization.

Be clear about what your position is and exactly what you want your legislator to do. Identify legislation by bill number. A brief, one page written assessment of your issue should be presented to your legislator so that he or she can refer to it later.

Be firm on your position and remember that it is OK to disagree, but don’t argue or threaten your legislator if he or she disagrees with your stand. You will need his or her support on future issues. Be sure and follow up with any information requested by your legislator. A brief thank you note is not mandatory but is always appreciated and helps your legislator remember you and your issue.

Letters/Emails Letters/emails can be written to any legislator, but letters/emails from a constituent will have much greater influence. If you are a constituent, begin your letter/email by saying so.

Make clear your position and exactly what you want your legislator to do. Identify legislation by bill number.
Avoid form letters/emails. Use your own words and personalize your letter/email by explaining how the issue will affect you, your family, your clients, your profession or your community.

Ask for your legislator’s position on the matter and request a reply. Timing is important. It is most effective to communicate with a legislator close to the time a bill is being considered in his or her chamber.

Be sure and thank your legislator when he or she votes as you had requested. It is important to let your legislator know if you are pleased with the job that he or she is doing. On the other hand, tell your legislator when he or she displeases you with his or her vote but do it politely and professionally.

Phone Calls If the legislature is in session, your legislator is likely to be on the chamber floor or in committee meetings. When talking to a secretary or aide, identify yourself by name, address and hometown. Identify the bill by number and state how you want your legislator to vote. If you want to discuss the bill more fully with your legislator, ask that your call be returned and leave a number where you can be reached later in the day, as some legislators are only able to return phone calls in the late afternoon or evening.

Contacting your legislator may seem intimidating, but it's important to remember that he or she is elected to represent you in the legislative process. It's worth the effort and does get easier with a little practice.

Lobbying Tips

1. Lobbying is a year-round process. It is important to interact with elected decision-makers on a regular basis. Then, when you have an issue to discuss, you have already established a relationship. DON'T just show up when you need something!
2. Building relationships with lawmakers means getting to know them, their personal interests and histories, and even their families. Having a relationship doesn't guarantee their support, but it does help to ensure that they will listen to you.
3. Being an effective lobbyist means being active in the political process by supporting issues and attending political functions.
4. At the state and federal levels, so many bills are introduced that it's impossible for a lawmaker to study all of them. Instead, they rely on their constituents, other members of Congress or the legislature – and lobbyists – to familiarize them with the contents of many bills. This means that the elected official NEEDS to hear from you.
5. Don't overwhelm the elected official with information. Keep it concise, easy to understand and free of jargon that's familiar to members of your organization but may be Greek to the lawmaker.
6. In presenting your case, make your main point first, followed by supporting points of information. Illustrate with anecdotes whenever possible.
7. In dealing with elected officials, ALWAYS tell the truth. And, remember, a half-truth is a half-lie!
8. When meeting with an elected official, make sure you're prepared. Try to anticipate every question that might be asked and do your homework in advance. Nothing will cause you to lose credibility faster than being ill-prepared, uncertain or vague.
9. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't bluff. Instead, admit it and promise to have the answer by a certain time.
10. When you are opposing legislation, don't attack those who support it. Stick to the issues and don't get personal.
11. Regard those who oppose you – both lawmakers and members of advocacy groups – as temporary adversaries – NOT ENEMIES. Coalitions shift, and the very people you're opposing today might be able to help you tomorrow.
12. If a bill or ordinance you are opposing contains some good points, acknowledge them rather than knocking the legislation as a whole. Then focus on the provisions that you oppose, pointing out their flaws and giving the reasons why what you're proposing is better.
13. Familiarize yourself with the decision-making process and timing. Your local or state elected officials won't appreciate hearing from you the night before the bill is scheduled for a vote.
14. Don't forget to say "Thanks for your help."

How to Form a Relationship with Your Legislators

It is important to interact with elected decision-makers on a regular basis. Then when you have an issue to discuss, you have already established a relationship.

1. Develop a year-round relationship with state legislators.
 - Add their names to mailing lists.
 - Invite them to CASA events, especially if the media will be there.
 - Introduce them at events or give them special greetings upon arrival.
 - *Thank them* for state funding currently received.
 - Visit their offices at least once a year, and make your visits brief.
 - Get to know legislative staff as well and also invite them to events.
2. Assume your legislators are allies. Be positive.
3. Identify yourself beyond CASA connections. Mention business, civic, church, school and family interests.
4. Be useful to legislators as a source of correct information. Do not guess at answers. If you do not know, promise to locate information and follow through. Stay informed about issues that affect children and update them when issues impact children in your area. Send them clippings and copies of community letters.
5. Keep a background file on your legislators. Learn who they are, what their interests are and their thoughts and record on supporting children's issues.
6. Give public recognition to deserving legislators through awards or honorary luncheons. Mention their assistance in press interviews.
7. Attend social events at which legislators are present – not to lobby, but to let them know you are an active member of the community.
8. Make calls, send emails or write letters when asked:
To find your legislators' contact information, visit <http://www.legis.state.ga.us/>
To write to your legislator, know whether he or she is a Senator or Representative.
Address the letter to:
The Honorable (official's first and last name)
State Representative *OR* State Senator
Office Address
Atlanta, GA 30334
9. **Don't forget to notice and thank anyone who has helped you and CASA. Never forget to let your legislator know you appreciate what he or she has done at your request or on CASA's behalf. Saying, "Thanks for your help" goes a long way. Advocacy is about cultivating relationships for the long run.**

Hints of Developing Relationships with Public Officials

In developing and maintaining relationships with public officials, keep in mind these factors which may affect your success in developing a good relationship:

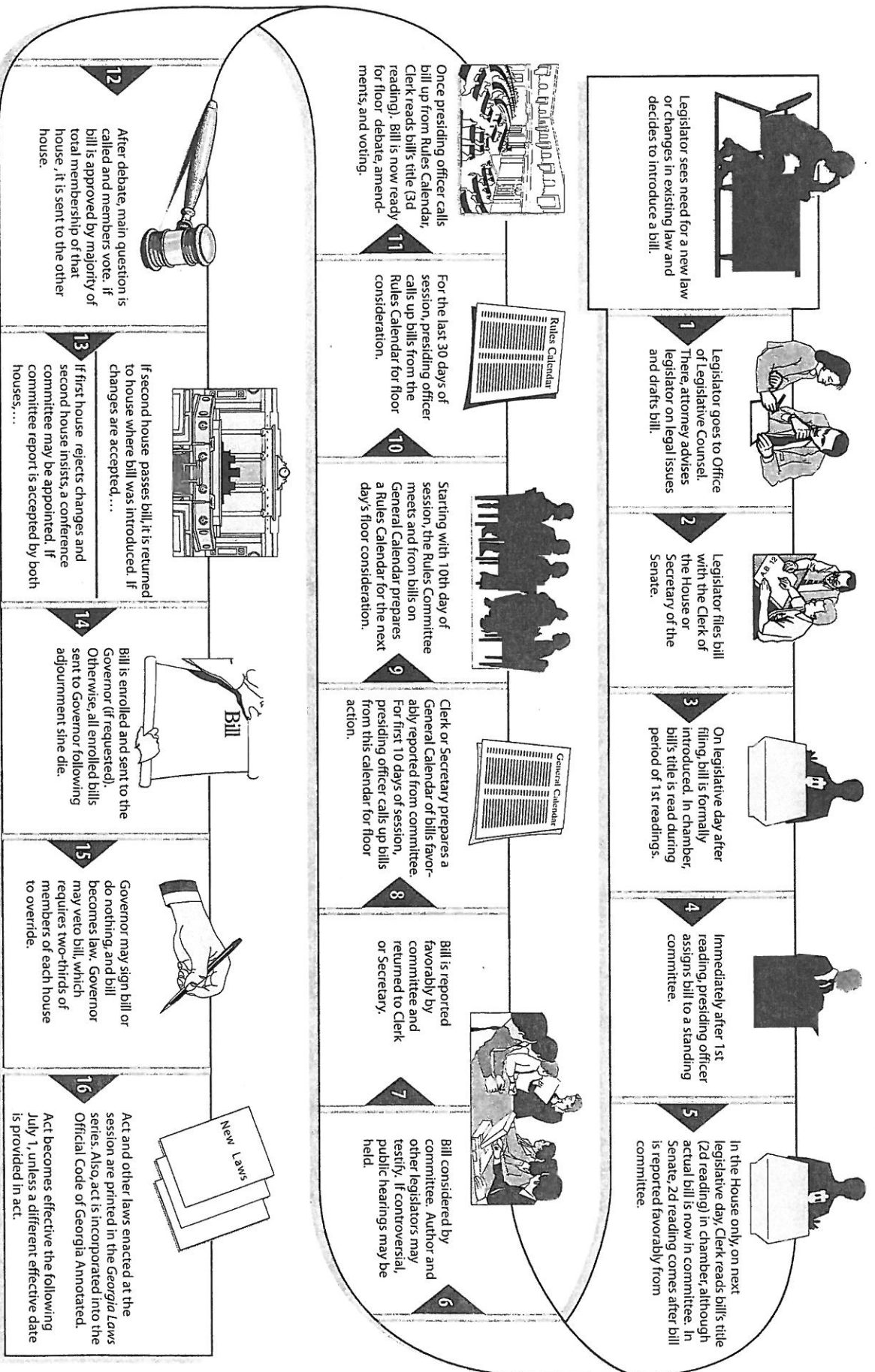
1. *Constituent power* – officials are most responsive to registered voters in their own districts.
2. *Human relations* – officials are people first, officials second. Approach them in a cooperative, non-adversarial manner and treat their opinions with respect.
3. *Personal relationships* – officials respond more positively to people they know than to strangers.
4. *Knowledge of background / ideology* – increase your credibility with officials by knowing their background, positions on issues, etc.

Make a plan for maintaining frequent contact with your public officials. Some suggested ideas are as follows:

1. Visit when newly elected to introduce the officials to your organization.
2. Invite them to an event or meeting.
3. Write/email, phone or visit to educate the officials on your organization's positions.
4. Write/email or call to ask for information on issues.
5. Write/email, call or visit to provide information on issues.
6. Invite officials to speak to your organization or group on general government concerns or selected issues.
7. Write/email, call or visit to ask for official's vote on specific issue.

One caution: CASA cannot endorse or support any candidate for public office. Any invitations to attend events during the time the official is a candidate should be on a non-partisan basis and campaign materials cannot be mentioned or distributed.

How a Bill Is Passed in the Georgia Legislature



TRACKING A BILL THROUGH THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

IN SENATE

IDEA

Conceived by Legislator, Legislative Committees, citizens, groups of citizens or copied from another state.

DRAFTING

Bills are drafted by Legislative Counsel and entered into legislative management system.

INTRODUCTION AND FIRST READING

Filed by a Senator with Secretary of the Senate who assigns it a number and prints.

On next legislative day, read first time and referred to Committee by President of the Senate. Bills are routinely assigned by subject matter; discretion lies with President.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Committee considers and studies Bill, receives expert testimony and hears from all interested parties.

Committee alternatives are to: (1) Recommend Bill or Resolution Do Pass; (2) Recommend Do NOT Pass; (3) Recommend Do Pass with changes (amendments or substitutes); (4) Hold Bill.

Final Committee action reported to the Senate in a written report.

SECOND READING

Bill read second time on legislative day following Committee report.

THIRD READING AND PASSAGE

The following legislative day, third reading and debate; amendments and substitutes adopted; final vote taken by roll call and recorded on passage of all General Bills.

TRANSMITTAL TO HOUSE

Bill then Engrossed, signed by the Secretary of the Senate and transmitted to the House of Representatives.

IN HOUSE

FIRST READING

Bill read first time and referred to Committee by Speaker of the House.

SECOND READING

On next legislative day, read second time.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Committee considers and studies Bill, receives expert testimony and hears from all interested parties.

Committee alternatives are: (1) Recommend Bill or Resolution Do Pass; (2) Recommend Do NOT Pass; (3) Recommend Do Pass with changes (amendments or substitutes); (4) Report without recommendation; (5) Hold Bill.

Final Committee action reported to the House in a written report.

THIRD READING AND PASSAGE

The following legislative day, third reading and debate; amendments and substitutes adopted and final vote taken.

TRANSMITTAL BACK TO SENATE

Bill signed by the Clerk of the House of Representatives and transmitted back to the Senate.

If House makes changes, Senate must agree or disagree to changes. If the two Houses fail to reach agreement on a measure, a Conference Committee may be established with three members from each House appointed by the Presiding Officer. To complete passage, both Houses must agree to report of Conference Committee.

GOVERNOR'S SIGNATURE

Bill then Emrolled, signed by President of the Senate, Secretary of the Senate, Speaker of the House and Clerk of the House and sent to Governor for his approval or disapproval. Governor signs or vetoes Bill within time limit; assigns Act number to Bill. Governor sends Bill which is now an Act (Law) to the Secretary of State for filing, printing and safekeeping.

VETO: The Governor may approve or veto a Bill within six days after receipt when the General Assembly is in session. After the Session is concluded, he has forty days to approve or veto the Bill. If he fails to take action within the prescribed time, the Bill becomes a Law. If he vetoes the Bill, the General Assembly may override the veto by a two-thirds vote of each House at the next Session.