



American Legion Auxiliary

Advocacy Guide



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

**A Grassroots Legislative Advocacy Guide
of the American Legion Auxiliary**

www.legion-aux.org

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ADVOCACY AND THE AMERICAN LEGION AUXILIARY

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 (ALA) is the largest patriotic women's service organization in the nation, with nearly 850,000 members in some 9,500 communities. ALA members believe in allegiance to God and Country, national security, volunteerism, patriotism and responsible citizenship. The ALA supports the legislative priorities and service programs of The American Legion, along with the ALA's own outreach programs supporting our United States veterans, young people and communities. By virtue of our sheer numbers, the more than 3 million members of The Legion Family are a mighty force in providing for today's needs and working toward a better future by influencing public policy and advocating for beneficial change and reform. Through our status as the wives, mothers, daughters, step-daughters, granddaughters and sisters of a veteran, it is our obligation to do just that—advocate for our veterans, our military and their families.

Advocacy is defined as a constituent relaying his/her ideas and opinions to elected and appointed governmental officials. These include the President of the United States; members of Congress – our United States senators and United States representatives; our state governors and legislators; our local mayors, county commissioners; city or county councilors; and personnel in governmental agencies. Advocacy is successful when many individuals with the same goals and sentiments contact governmental officials and personnel to express their views. Together, with members of The American Legion and the Sons of The American Legion, our voices have collective weight.

The ALA has been and will continue to be a strong advocate for veterans' issues promoted and supported by The American Legion. Many bills pertaining to veteran benefits, military funding and Veterans Affairs funding are proposed every year. While we may not lend our voice to every bill introduced, we should take the opportunity to make a difference for those bills of particular interest to the ALA. To help understand the bills and the issues surrounding each bill, many websites offer synopses of the legislation. By being informed and engaged, American Legion Auxiliary members can advocate for veterans and their families who will benefit from appropriate legislation.

Advocacy isn't the responsibility of a few. It is the responsibility of all who care about our veterans. The purpose of this Advocacy Guide is to aid each of us in becoming a competent and informed advocate. Tips on building relationships with legislators and their staff at all levels of government, gathering information on legislation and making legislative contacts are included in this guide.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

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 government and 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 ALA is based on relationships between the Auxiliary member and her legislator, so it is important to work at building a relationship.

The best way to become acquainted with your senator or representative is through frequent – and polite – contact. Elected officials want and need to know the opinions of their constituents since the constituency elected them and will choose to either re-elect or not re-elect them based on their performance in office. Building a relationship with a legislator does not need to take place through a face-to-face meeting. Most elected officials have local or regional offices and hold meetings in local communities. Visiting their local offices and attending local 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 officials. These actions make each of us an advocate.

Following are some icebreakers for making contact with legislators:

- 1) Send thank-you notes to compliment legislators on a particular job well done, a vote you supported, or on their committee appointments.
- 2) Invite your state senator or representative to address The American Legion Family.
- 3) Share with legislators when the ALA, TAL and SAL host a noteworthy event or when members have achieved an outstanding accomplishment.
- 4) Let your legislator know when you disagree with a vote he/she has cast and politely ask for the reasons behind their vote.
- 5) As legislative issues arise, contact your legislator and share your opinion and point of view.
- 6) Ask legislators how they will be voting on an issue and ask for their response in writing.

IMPORTANT LEGISLATIVE ISSUES

Recurring Budget and Funding Issues

- ★ Department of Veterans Affairs funding—support for mandatory funding for a large part of the VA budget so that the VA can function without having to go through the budget process each year.
- ★ Department of Defense funding—support for adequate funding for our military’s daily salaries, housing and the equipment they need to complete their mission, etc.
- ★ State Veterans’ Homes—support for adequate funding for our veterans in these facilities.
- ★ Department of Housing and Urban Development and Department of Labor—support for adequate funding for initiatives related to affordable housing and job training and placement and Transition Assist Programs (TAP).

Veterans’ Healthcare Issues

- ★ Wounded Warrior Act—support for returning wounded soldiers.
- ★ Long delays in processing VA claims—support for legislation aimed at reducing the backlog within the VA system.
- ★ Having to prove that health issues are combat-related—the burden of proof should be placed more on the military record system.
- ★ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury—the classifications and effects of PTSD and TBI can cause serious problems for our returning military. Funding for studies and care are vital.

Women Veterans’ Issues

- ★ PTSD and Military Sexual Trauma (MST) are among the priority issues for women in the military.
- ★ Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act—The VA System has historically been a male-oriented system. It is time to look carefully at health issues faced by women in the military, now 15 percent of total personnel.

Other Veterans’ Issues and Benefits

- ★ Educational benefits—support for expanded educational benefits for our current servicemembers and recent military veterans.
- ★ POW/MIA—support for the location and identification of the remains from past wars.
- ★ Concurrent receipt—support for disabled veterans whose disability pay is deducted from their military pensions.
- ★ Homeless veterans—support for programs that assist homeless veterans and veterans who are at risk of becoming homeless.

Issues Affecting the Quality of Military Family Life

- ★ TAP/Transitioning Program—support for funding and program redesign to help soldiers readjust to civilian life.
- ★ Electronic healthcare records—support for transition to electronic records to help military families (important because of how frequently they are relocated).
- ★ Basic Allowance for Housing—with the cost of housing increasing, the DoD system must keep pace with adequate housing for all military.
- ★ Family Support Network—with so many deployed soldiers, the Family Support Network has become a vital part of the military family.

Patriotic Issues

- ★ Supporting the Flag Protection Amendment.
- ★ Supporting the preservation of reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at events and at schools.
- ★ “Get Out the Vote” initiatives.
- ★ Immigration issues.

Children & Youth Issues

- ★ Issues affecting the children of our nation, state or local community in regard to the health, safety or well-being of our youth.

IN-PERSON VISITS

Visiting your legislators and their staff in their district offices or in the Washington, D.C. offices requires planning:

- 1) **Make an appointment.** Contact the scheduler in your legislator's office to make an appointment. Requests must be made in writing. Often, 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 such as Veterans Affairs. The legislator depends on assistants to research information, weigh the evidence and make recommendations. At the time you schedule the appointment, you will need to identify the topic(s) you would like to discuss. For contact information, go to any one of these sites:
<http://capwiz.com/legion>
www.house.gov, www.senate.gov
- 2) **Be on time and be flexible.** Legislators and staff assistants have tightly scheduled days. If you are tardy for the appointment, there may not be enough time to see the legislator or assistant. Also recognize that if a floor vote is called, the legislator must quickly get to the House or Senate floor. You may 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 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 about the bill. Use supporting facts, not emotionalism, to make your points relevant and "bring the issues home."
- 4) **Ask your legislator for his/her stand on the issue.** Get a commitment. Let the legislator know what action you would like from him/her. Are you asking for a vote for or against the issue? Would you like him/her to speak for or against the bill on the floor? Does the legislator have a contact with a committeemember, and is he/she willing to promote your position with that contact?
- 5) **Be polite.** Using good manners leaves the door open for future productive visits.
- 6) **Be gracious.** Thank your legislator for taking time out of his/her busy schedule to meet with you. This also is a great time to verify the commitment you feel your legislator made regarding the issue you discussed.
- 7) **Report the outcome.** Let your unit, district, department and/or national chairman know how the meeting went and what the outcome might be.

- 8) **Present a business card upon arrival; get a business card from those you meet.** This contact information will prove invaluable for future meetings and correspondence.
- 9) **Say “thank-you.”** Always follow up with the person you met. Email is best; faxes are less effective. Handwritten notes will be respected but can take three weeks or more to reach their destination. Your thanks and response to those with whom you met should be immediate.

CONGRESSIONAL STAFF: A VITAL LINK TO ADVOCACY SUCCESS

Building rapport with a Congressional staff member is essential for carrying out your advocacy agenda. If a legislator is unavailable to you, don't hesitate to meet with a member of his or her staff. Legislators rely on staff members to handle many constituent contacts. This is especially true on the national level.

After you meet with a staff member, he or she is likely to summarize your meeting in a memorandum 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.

Each representative's office is organized differently; however, most Congressional offices include the following staff positions:

Chief of Staff—This staff member is usually based in Washington, D.C. Typically this position directs the staff, follows both local and national issues—especially those with political implications—evaluates the political outcome of legislative proposals and constituent requests and oversees office operations, including the assignment of work and the supervision of key staff. Your contact with this person may be limited.

Director of the District or State Office—This staff member is closest to the grassroots and is particularly sensitive to constituent concerns. Though principally concerned with local matters, the district or state director can be an excellent liaison for conveying your views on national issues to the legislator. Getting to know the district or state director can be important in establishing a relationship with your representative.

Appointments Secretary—This member of the staff is the keeper of the legislator's calendar. Get to know the appointments secretary if you want to get to know your legislator. This individual is responsible for making travel arrangements and coordinating speaking dates as well as visits to the district, etc.

Legislative Assistants (LA)—These staffers are issue specialists. Almost all Congressional offices will have an LA dedicated to 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 within the panel's jurisdiction may be handled by committee or subcommittee staff. They are experts on the issues they cover. These staffers will be responsive to constituents of the legislator, even though they are employed by the committees and subcommittees.

Case and Project Workers—These staffers are responsible for responding to nonlegislative constituent concerns, including any specific problems constituents have with government agencies. These workers may be in Washington, district or state offices. Case or project staff usually work closely with the district or state director.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

In this section you will find information to make things go smoothly when communicating with your legislator by letter, fax, email or phone.

Letter Writing

Hand signed and mailed letters are always appropriate. For a more timely conveyance of your message, email is faster. Use email only when you have a real person's email address. Communicate via fax only if the Congressional office so requests. This method is the least effective for communities with a Chamber of Congress.

Before September 11, 2001, written correspondence with a member of Congress was easy and effective. Today, letter writing is still an effective means of communication, but it is no longer the most timely preferred method of communication. Letters sent to a Congressional office in Washington, D.C. through the U.S. Postal Service must go through a decontamination process which can delay its arrival by three weeks or longer.

- ★ It is recommended that a letter be typed rather than handwritten. If you are writing to your senator or representative, consider sending your letter to the legislator's nearest local office. It will arrive within a day or two of sending, and the staff in the local office will know what to do with it once received.

Effective letter writing should include the name and number of the bill and should observe the following principles:

- ★ Clearly identify yourself—Make sure you identify yourself as a constituent or concerned citizen. Be sure to include your name and address on the letter itself as the envelope could get lost.
- ★ Keep it short—Try to keep your letter to one page or less and focused on one subject. Be factual enough to support your position. Don't be emotional or philosophical. Explain to your legislator why he/she should be concerned. Your point of view may be one that the legislator has not heard or understood.
- ★ Get to the point—Summarize your position or request in the first paragraph. The rest of the letter can explain and include supporting information.
- ★ Be factual—Don't dilute your credibility by using arguments that cannot be substantiated. Use justification gleaned from The American Legion's website, recent legislative alerts, *The Dispatch* articles or *The American Legion* or *Auxiliary* magazine. Two or three facts are sufficient. Too many can lose the reader of your letter.
- ★ Personalize your message—Explain how the proposal in question will affect you, your family, your community or your organization.
- ★ Be cordial—Respect your legislator's right to have a different opinion. Offer to provide further rationale in support of changing his/her position. Your goal is to build a relationship and keep the

lines of communication open. The elected official who does not agree with us on a particular issue could be our strongest ally on the next one.

- ★ Be specific—Ask for specific action either to support or oppose a specific bill, amendment or other action. If possible, refer to the legislation by name and number, stating who introduced it and summarizing its intent.
- ★ Thank your legislator—Be sincere in your expression of thanks for his/her time and attention. Example: “Thanking 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 and a “desired by” date. If you do not hear from your legislator by that date, follow up with a phone call.

When writing to a senator or representative other than your own, you will not likely receive a reply unless you make it clear why the legislator should reply. For example, if you represent an organization or company which has members or does business in the legislator’s district, include that information. It makes your information more relevant.

Telephone Calls

Telephone calls are good when time is short—just before an important vote—and may influence a legislator’s decision whether to support or oppose an issue.

Call toll-free to the Capitol Switchboard: 1-877-851-6437, 1-800-828-0498 or 1-800-614-2803. Ask for the office you would like to reach. You also can request that one office transfer you to another. Most staff members are happy to do so.

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. It is not necessary for you to speak directly to your legislator. Leave your message with the person answering the phone or with the staff person working on the issue. Present your facts and position on the issue. Tell the person what action you would like your legislator to take. Be polite. To ensure that your message is transmitted to your legislator, request a response in writing. Thank the person for listening to your request. Be prepared to answer his/her questions. Be sure to get the name of the person with whom you spoke.

Follow up. Find out how your legislator voted on the issue. If your

legislator supported your views, be sure to thank him/her. If the vote was not what you wanted, note your disappointment but indicate your desire to continue working with your legislator. Never be rude, impolite or threatening.

Fax

Legislators usually have a fax number available for public use. Faxing your letters instead of mailing them may increase delivery time because Congressional mail security screening can delay postal letters by weeks, particularly during heightened security alerts. However, faxes may get overlooked unless a legislative staff member has requested your information be conveyed by a fax.

Email

Many members automatically delete email from outside their district or may reject messages copied to other members. More are using the "WriteRep" system where you must have a zip code from the district of the Congressman with whom you want to correspond.

Tip: Go to the Congressman's website and get the zip code of one of their district offices or get a zip code for any city in that district.

For a complete list of email addresses and fax numbers for Congress, the Senate, governors and state legislators, visit www.conservativeusa.org/mega-cong.htm.

SAMPLE LETTER ASKING FOR LEGISLATOR'S VOTE/SUPPORT

Sender's Name
Address
City State Zip

Date

Senator Richard G. Lugar
1180 Market Tower
10 West Market Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Dear Senator Lugar,

As a proud Hoosier and member of the American Legion Auxiliary – the largest women's patriotic service organization with nearly 850,000 members – I thank you for your continued support and sponsorship of the U.S. Flag Protection Amendment.

With more than 23 million living veterans in the United States and nearly 20 million who served during times of war and conflict, the time has come for Congress to move beyond 16 years of rhetoric. 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 which you so proudly defended during your service in the United States Navy.

I ask you to bring this matter before the Senate and urge Congress to enact legislation to move a flag-protection Constitutional amendment to the people for ratification.

Thank you for your military service to our Country and for your service to us in Indiana. Please bring this important legislation before the Senate for adoption so our states can approve the U.S. Flag Protection Amendment in honor of all those who served and sacrificed for our freedom.

Respectfully,

Jane Smith
American Legion Auxiliary, Indiana Unit 777

cc: American Legion Auxiliary Department of Indiana

LEGISLATIVE WEBSITES

www.legion-aux.org

American Legion Auxiliary website. Subscribe to *ALA e-News* and *Auxiliary* magazine.

www.legion.org

The American Legion website. Subscribe to *The Dispatch* newsletter.

thomas.loc.gov

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

www.c-span.org/Resources/Media-Organizations

Link to media in your state to read about local issues and legislation.

www.c-span.org

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

www.va.gov

Department of Veterans Affairs. Read documentation of testimony given before Congressional committees, legislation pertaining to veterans. Access House and Senate VA committees. Locate your senator or representative.

veterans.house.gov

House committee on Veterans Affairs. Access subcommittees, legislation, schedule, hearings, contact information.

veterans.senate.gov

Senate committee on Veterans Affairs. Access legislation, issues, hearings, contact information.

capwiz.com/legion/home

Find synopses of legislative issues regarding veterans and the military, access The American Legion position on legislation, and locate bill sponsors and cosponsors. Find your elected officials: governor, senators, representatives. Locate governmental agencies. Check on election races in your area.

www.senate.gov

View a biographical and historical directory of senators, representatives, vice presidents. Find committees in the Senate. Access Veterans Affairs committee with information on legislation, issues, committee hearings and contact links.

www.house.gov

View directory of representatives, House committees and schedule and a link to the Veterans Affairs committee.

corporate.cqrollcall.com

877-827-3321

Site profiles all Congressional members, contact information, standing committees and state Congressional district maps.

www.leadershipdirectories.com

212-627-4140

Guide to federal agencies and governmental offices.

www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html

Congressional Record

www.fec.gov

Federal Election Commission

www.whitehouse.gov

White House

www.defenselink.mil

Department of Defense

www.state.gov

State Department

www.supremecourtus.gov

Supreme Court

www.census.gov

U.S. Census Bureau

Capitol Switchboard

202-224-3121



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