



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.ALAforVeterans.org
www.ALAFoundation.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 women's patriotic service organization in the world, with nearly 850,000 members in 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, active servicemembers and their families. By virtue of our 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. Because we are wives, mothers, daughters, step-daughters, granddaughters or sisters of a veteran, we're obligated to do just that — advocate for our veterans, our military and their families.

Advocacy is defined as a constituent relaying his or her ideas and opinions to governmental officials. These include the President of the United States; our United States senators and representatives; state governors and legislators; mayors, county commissioners and city or county council members; and personnel in governmental agencies. Advocacy succeeds when many individuals with the same goals and sentiments contact government officials and staff members to express their views. Our voices have collective weight together with those of members of The American Legion and the Sons of The American Legion.

The Auxiliary has been and will continue to be a strong advocate for veterans issues promoted and supported by The American Legion. Many bills pertaining to veterans benefits, military funding and Veterans Affairs funding are proposed every year. While we might not speak out about every bill introduced, we should take the opportunity to make a difference for bills of particular interest to the Auxiliary. Many websites offer synopses of legislation to help people understand the bills and issues surrounding them. 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 help each of us become a competent and informed advocate. It includes tips on building relationships with legislators and their staff at all levels of government, gathering information on legislation and making legislative contacts.

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 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 Auxiliary is based on relationships between members and their legislators, so it is important to work at building those relationships.

The best way to become acquainted with a legislator is through frequent, polite contact. Elected officials want and need to know the opinions of their constituents who elected them and will choose whether to re-elect them based on their performance in office. You don't need to meet with a legislator face to face to build a relationship. Most elected officials have local or regional offices and hold local meetings. Visiting their local offices and attending 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 them.

Each of us can be an advocate. Here are some ways to break the ice with legislators:

- ★ Send thank-you notes to compliment legislators on a job well done, a vote you supported, or on committee appointments.
- ★ Invite your state senator or representative to address The American Legion Family.
- ★ Let lawmakers know when the Legion, the Auxiliary and the Sons of The American Legion host a noteworthy event or when members celebrate an outstanding accomplishment.
- ★ Let your legislators know when you disagree with a vote they cast and politely ask why they voted that way.
- ★ As legislative issues arise, contact your legislators to share your opinion and point of view.
- ★ Ask legislators how they plan to vote on an issue, and ask for their response in writing.

IMPORTANT LEGISLATIVE ISSUES

Recurring Budget and Funding Issues

- ★ **Department of Veterans Affairs funding:** Mandatory funding for a large part of the VA budget so the VA doesn't have to go through the budget process each year.
- ★ **Department of Defense funding:** Adequate funding for our military's daily salaries and housing and the equipment they need to complete their mission.
- ★ **State veterans' homes:** Adequate funding for our veterans in these facilities.
- ★ **Department of Housing and Urban Development and Department of Labor:** Adequate funding for initiatives related to affordable housing and job training and placement as well as Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

Veterans Healthcare Issues

- ★ **Wounded Warrior Act:** Support for returning wounded soldiers.
- ★ **Long delays in processing VA claims:** Support for legislation to reduce the VA system's backlog.
- ★ **Proving that health issues are combat-related:** The burden of proof should be placed more on the military record system.
- ★ **Post Traumatic Stress; Traumatic Brain Injury:** The classification and effects of PTSD and TBI can cause serious problems for our returning military. Funding for studies and care is vital.

Women Veterans Issues

- ★ **PTSD and Military Sexual Trauma (MST):** These are priority issues for women in the military.
- ★ **Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act:** The VA System historically has been oriented toward men. The growing number of women in the military have special healthcare needs.

Other Veterans Issues and Benefits

- ★ **Educational benefits:** Expanded educational benefits for active servicemembers and recent military veterans.
- ★ **POWs; MIAs:** Locating and identifying servicemembers' remains.
- ★ **Concurrent receipt:** End the practice of deducting disabled veterans' disability pay from their military pensions.
- ★ **Homeless veterans:** Programs that assist homeless veterans and veterans at risk of becoming homeless.

Issues Affecting the Quality of Military Family Life

- ★ **TAP/Transitioning Program:** Funding and redesigning programs to help soldiers readjust to civilian life.
- ★ **Electronic healthcare records:** A transition to electronic healthcare records is important for military families, who are relocated frequently.
- ★ **Basic Allowance for Housing:** The DoD housing allowance for military families must keep pace with rising housing costs.
- ★ **Family Support Network:** With so many deployed soldiers, the Family Support Network has become a vital part of the military family.

Patriotic Issues

- ★ **The Flag Protection Amendment:** Legislation to make desecration of the U.S. flag a constitutional offense.
- ★ **Pledge of Allegiance:** Continue recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance at public events and schools.
- ★ **Voting:** Initiatives that encourage and enable people to vote.
- ★ **Immigration issues:** Strengthening U.S. borders.

Children and Youth Issues

- ★ **Military children:** Issues affecting the children of military servicemembers and veterans.

IN-PERSON VISITS

A visit to legislators and staff in their district offices or in Washington, D.C. requires planning. Here are some steps to follow.

- 1) **Make an appointment:** Contact the scheduler in your legislator's office to make an appointment. Requests must be made in writing. 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. Legislators depend on assistants to research information, weigh evidence and make recommendations. When you schedule the appointment, you will need to identify any topics you would like to discuss. For contact information, go to 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 tight schedules. If you arrive late, there may not be enough time to see the legislator or an assistant. Also recognize that if a floor vote is called, the legislator will have to get to the House or Senate floor quickly. You might 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. Use facts, not emotionalism, to make your points and bring the issues home.
- 4) **Ask your legislator for his or her stand on the issue:** Get a commitment. Let legislators know what action you would like them to take. Are you asking for a vote for or against an issue? Would you like the legislator to speak for or against a bill on the floor? Does the legislator have a contact on a particular committee, and is he or she willing to promote your position to that contact?
- 5) **Be polite:** Using good manners leaves the door open for productive future visits.
- 6) **Be gracious:** Thank legislators for taking time out of their busy schedules to meet with you. This also is a great time to verify any commitment a legislator made regarding an issue you discussed.
- 7) **Report the outcome:** Let your unit, district, department and/or national chairman know how the meeting went and what outcome you expect.

- 8) **Exchange business cards:** This contact information will prove invaluable for future meetings and correspondence.
- 9) **Say thanks:** Always follow up immediately with the person you've met to say thanks. Email is best; faxes are less effective. Handwritten notes will be respected but can take three weeks or more to be delivered.

CONGRESSIONAL STAFF: A VITAL LINK TO SUCCESSFUL ADVOCACY

Building rapport with a congressional staff member often is necessary to carry out your advocacy agenda. If a legislator is unavailable, don't hesitate to meet with a staff member. Legislators, especially on the national level, rely on staff to handle many constituent contacts.

After you meet, a staff member likely will summarize your meeting in a memo 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, but most congressional offices include the following staff positions:

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

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

★ **Appointments Secretary:** This staff member keeps 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.

★ **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 for the panel might be handled by committee or subcommittee staff. They are experts on the issues they cover. These staffers will be responsive to legislators' constituents even though they don't work for a particular legislator.

★ **Case and Project Workers:** These staffers respond to nonlegislative constituent concerns, including specific problems constituents have with government agencies. These workers might 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, but email is faster. Use email only when you have a real person's email address. Communicate via fax only if the congressional office requests.

Before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it was faster and easier to use postal mail to correspond with a member of Congress. Now, letters sent to a congressional office in Washington, D.C. using postal mail must go through a decontamination process, which can delay arrival by three weeks or longer.

- ★ Type a letter rather than writing it by hand. If you are writing to a U.S. senator or representative, consider sending the letter to the legislator's nearest local office. It will arrive within a day or two, and the local staff will know what to do with it.

Always include the name and number of a bill in a letter concerning legislation. Here are some other guidelines:

- ★ **Clearly identify yourself:** Let the legislator know you are 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. Cite facts to support your position. Don't be emotional or philosophical. Explain to your legislator why he or she should be concerned. Your legislator might not have heard or understood your point of view before.
- ★ **Get to the point:** Summarize your position or request in the first paragraph. The rest of the letter can explain and include supporting information.
- ★ **Cite facts:** Don't dilute your credibility by using arguments that cannot be substantiated. Use justification gleaned from The American Legion's website (www.legion.org), recent legislative alerts, *The Dispatch* articles or *The American Legion* or *Auxiliary* magazine. Two or three facts are sufficient. Too many can lose your reader.
- ★ **Personalize your message:** Explain how a proposal 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 more information to support a change in opinion. Your goal is to build a relationship and keep the lines of communication open. An elected official who does not agree with you on one issue could be a strong ally on another.
- ★ **Be specific:** Ask your legislator to support or oppose a particular measure or take some other specific action. If possible, refer to the legislation by name and number, specify who introduced it and summarize its intent.

★ **Thank your legislator:** Be sincere in thanking legislators for their time and attention. You might write: “Thank 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 when you’d like to receive a response. If you do not hear from your legislator by that date, follow up with a phone call.

If you write to a lawmaker who doesn’t represent your area, you probably won’t receive a reply unless you make it clear why he or she should respond. For example, if you represent an organization or company that has members or does business in the legislator’s district, include that information. It makes your opinion or viewpoint more relevant.

Phone Calls

Phone calls are good when time is short, for example, just before an important vote. They might influence a legislator’s last-minute decision about whether to support an issue.

Call the Capitol Switchboard toll free at (866) 220-0044, (877) 851-6437 or (877) 762-8762. Ask for the office you would like to reach. You also may ask one office to 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. You don’t need to speak directly to your legislator. It’s fine to leave your message with the person answering the phone or with the staff person working on the issue. Present your facts and position. Tell the person what action you would like your legislator to take. Be polite. To ensure your legislator receives the message, request a response in writing. Thank the person for listening to your request and be prepared to answer questions. Don’t forget to write down the name of the person who took your call.

Follow up. Find out how your legislator voted on the issue. If your legislator supported your views, be sure to thank him or her. If the legislator didn’t do what you asked, note your disappointment but say you want to continue working together. Never be rude, impolite or threatening.

Fax

Legislators usually have a fax number for public use. Faxing letters instead of mailing them might shorten delivery time because congressional security screening can delay postal letters by weeks,

especially during heightened security alerts. However, faxes might be overlooked unless a legislative staff member has requested you communicate by fax.

Email

Many lawmakers automatically delete email from outside their district, or they might reject messages copied to other members. More are using www.house.gov/writerep, which requires you to enter a ZIP code from the district of the representative you want to contact. Go to the lawmaker's website to find the ZIP code of a district office and enter that, or use a ZIP code from any city in that district.

For a complete list of email addresses and fax numbers for U.S. representatives, senators, 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 St.
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Dear Senator Lugar,

As a proud Hoosier and member of the American Legion Auxiliary — the world's largest women's patriotic service organization at 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 veterans in the United States, including nearly 20 million who served during times of war and conflict, the time has come for Congress to move beyond more than a decade 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 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.ALforVeterans.org

American Legion Auxiliary website. Subscribe to *ALA eNews* 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 and 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 and contact information.

capwiz.com/legion/home

Find synopses of legislative issues affecting veterans and the military, access The American Legion's position on legislation, and locate bill sponsors and co-sponsors. Find your governor, senators and representatives. Locate governmental agencies and check on election races in your area.

www.senate.gov

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

www.house.gov

View a directory of representatives, House committees and schedules and a link to the Veterans Affairs Committee.

corporate.cqrollcall.com

This site has profiles of all members of Congress, contact information, standing committees and congressional district maps.

www.leadershipdirectories.com

A 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

From Washington, D.C.: (202) 224-3121

Toll free: (866) 220-0044, (877) 851-6437, or (877) 762-8762



**American Legion Auxiliary
National Headquarters
8945 N. Meridian St.
Indianapolis, IN 46260
P: (317) 569-4500 | F: (317) 569-4502
www.ALAforVeterans.org
www.ALAFoundation.org**

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