



Pennsylvania Municipal  
**League**

# Advocacy Toolkit

*What you need to know to be an effective  
advocate for your municipality*



# The League's Legislative Staff

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*We hope that you find this toolkit a valuable asset and that it  
inspires you to get involved on the local level  
supporting The League's legislative efforts.*



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## Introduction

As a local official, you play a unique role as both a local advocate for your constituents and as an advocate at the state level for your municipality. Just as is the case locally, grassroots advocacy efforts help win support for a particular issue, idea or piece of legislation. Your participation as a League advocate helps to bring local issues into focus for state legislators. Grassroots and local advocacy puts a name and face on the myriad of issues that come before state legislators every day. Communication and feedback from a local official helps state legislators to understand the impact of legislation – good and bad – providing a level of accountability back to the community and constituents they also represent.

## The League's Policy and Legislative Positions

The League is a member driven organization, therefore, we take our lead from our membership about which programs and services to provide, as well as which policies we should promote and what positions we should take on legislation. Our policy process, as explained in our annual Policy Statement (found on our [website](#)), allows members to bring issues and policy positions in the form of resolutions to their spring district meetings. The district membership discusses and votes on the issue before proceeding to the Annual Summit for further vetting and approval by the full League membership. Policy from adopted resolutions is incorporated into our Policy Statement.



The League's legislative staff utilize the Policy Statement regularly when assessing legislation and determining the association's position. Additionally, the basic guidelines of protecting and promoting local governance, including local decision making, new or updated tools to assist local officials in local administration and protection of local budgets, help to guide The League's stance on certain issues.

The League's Board of Directors and Legislative Committee play a key role in guiding our legislative positions and determining what The League considers to be its legislative priorities.

## A Local Connection: Municipal Officials as League Advocates

As stated earlier, a municipal official, either elected or appointed, can play a tremendously important role in local and grassroots advocacy. The League encourages and relies upon local advocacy to accomplish its member driven agenda.

You have the same constituents as your state office holder. You, however, are closer to those constituents and have the unique opportunity to advocate from the grassroots perspective to ensure local government has the tools it needs to make your community the best it can be. As a fellow elected official, whether a local mayor, councilmember, supervisor or commissioner, you are well-positioned to establish a relationship with your municipality's House and Senate legislators. While a local appointed official - an administrator, manager, city clerk and municipal secretary - is able to support their local officials and, in some cases, also establish a connection with the state office holders.

Whether elected or appointed, local officials should not underestimate the power of being able to communicate regularly and directly with House and Senate legislators. Communicating the local impact of a piece of legislation and providing local details are powerful tools. Legislators are inundated with not only hundreds of pieces of legislation, but communications from hundreds of statewide advocacy groups, including The League. Therefore, communications with a local connection have a greater opportunity to be heard over the barrage.

Additionally, communicating a local connection helps your legislators understand an issue or bill's impact on a more concrete level. Legislators have to be generalists on most subjects – there are simply too many topics to have a grasp of it all. If you take the time to educate your legislators about the impact of a particular bill it will, in all likelihood, be viewed as helpful. The legislator may even turn to you as a resource for future

bills. Finally, it is important to know that if your legislator does not hear from you, he or she will assume the silence means there is no concern with a bill.

### **The Power of Sharing Local Data and Information**

Not only is a local connection powerful, but the ability to provide local facts, figures and examples greatly enhances the communication. The appointed officials of your community are a great resource when it comes to telling your local story to your legislators. The ability to include budget information, costs of doing business and the process of implementing or following a law, makes an impression and can help a legislator understand the real impact of a piece of legislation. Such stories can influence a legislator's stance on an issue or even their vote on an important bill. Arming your legislators with these stories and data can also help to counteract opposing lobbying efforts. Therefore, it is not enough to just tell a legislator that you support or oppose a bill, you must also explain why.

### **Building a Relationship is Key**

The goal of your advocacy efforts and communications is to build and maintain relationships with state legislators. While there can be frequent turnover of elected officials at both the local and state level, you must remain proactive and keep an open line of communication from your municipality to Harrisburg. In order to create a positive and sustainable local to state relationship, you must keep in regular contact with your state legislators so newly elected local officials can carry on the mantle.

## **Communicating With Your State Legislators**

Today's technology makes communicating with your legislators easy and instantaneous. The form of communication you use depends on the urgency of the issue, as well as what you are looking to achieve. Let's look at some possible communication avenues and when best to put them to use:

**Meetings in Harrisburg** – Meetings in the Capitol are good opportunities to show you are

active and engaged in the legislative process. They provide a chance to touch base, and also allow you to meet your legislator's staff so that future communication can be more familiar. A meeting with staff can actually be more effective because they usually have more time to spend and will read over any material you leave.

On session days, the Capitol is full of advocates looking to meet and discuss their issues. Therefore, Harrisburg meetings should be scheduled well in advance and you should be well prepared to make the most of your short meeting.

**Meetings in the Home District** – Meetings at home, whether on your turf or in the legislator's district office, are an excellent opportunity to sit down and talk details with your legislator. Typically, this is the time to get into "the weeds" of the issues you are discussing by providing examples, giving a tour of a project and/or explaining the local budget or another local issue impacted by legislation. Laying this groundwork will help you later when you need to quickly connect with the legislator on an issue. And, as stated earlier, details give a legislator a frame of reference when considering how to vote on a particular bill.

**Letters** – Letters are a communication tool to use when there is time on your side. Chances are a letter will not be read right away, so you would not want to communicate by letter, your municipality's position on a bill that is about to be voted.

**Email** – Email can be used for both formal or informal communication with your legislator and their staff. You can use email to send letters or request meetings in a formal setting. In a more informal setting, once you have established a relationship with your legislator and their staff, you can send a quick email as a follow-up, including data or pertinent information, or a reminder of your municipality's position. A legislator may have both a public email account monitored by staff, as well as a more private account. It may also be beneficial to email a certain staff member about an issue. You will want to try to ascertain the best email to use if you plan to send an email that you want to be read quickly.



**Phone Calls** – Placing a call to the Harrisburg office is best used to get a message to your legislator on the day of a vote. In most instances, you will need to leave your message with staff, but they will be diligent in passing the message on especially if you explain that your call is timely and associated with an upcoming vote.

**Texts** – Using a text message to communicate clearly indicates that you have developed a personal relationship with your legislator. You should be congratulated for that level of interaction. Texting is again useful for an emergent issue when immediate correspondence is necessary.

### Communicating Do's

Regardless of the form that your communication takes, here are a few things to remember:

- ▶ **Be concise** – know what points you want to make and keep them brief
- ▶ **Be accurate** – make sure your facts and information are correct
- ▶ **Be original** – personalize your form letter with local data and letterhead
- ▶ **Be courteous in your tone** – always be professional, even when unhappy with a vote
- ▶ **Be clear in your request** – make a specific ask, such as vote “no”/ vote “yes”
- ▶ **Be persistent** – remind the legislator of your position – this also tells the legislator that you are still interested in how he or she votes
- ▶ **Be timely** – gauge when to communicate based on where the bill is in the process
- ▶ **Be certain to follow up** – a thank you or acknowledgment that he or she did not vote as you requested is important
- ▶ **Be involved in the PA Municipal League** – our legislative staff will be glad to assist you and provide guidance on when and how to communicate, provide details and the status of legislation and assist with meetings, both in Harrisburg and in your municipality.

## Become Involved in The League's Legislative Program

Anyone can assist with our advocacy efforts. The most important step you can take is staying informed about what we are working on and following our lead on suggestions for action. Listed below are several opportunities to become involved with The League's legislative program and work as a local advocate for your community.

**Join The League's Legislative Committee** – Overall, the Committee works with the Executive Director and The League's legislative staff to pursue an aggressive plan of action to see legislative issues come to fruition. To help in this effort, The League established three sub-committees within the Legislative Committee: Public Safety; Municipal Finance; and Community Development and Infrastructure. The Committee and its sub-committees meet on a regular basis to discuss introduced legislation and potential advocacy strategies.

**Introduce a Policy Resolution** – Any member municipality may submit a policy resolution during The League's spring district meetings. Policy resolutions should address an issue not already included in our Policy Statement or update an existing policy. As explained earlier, the resolutions process is the basis for our policy positions, ultimately providing direction for The League when representing local government interests before the legislative, judicial and executive bodies in both Harrisburg and Washington.



**Read The League's Legislative Locator** – This electronic newsletter is full of valuable information on current legislative items, including bill summaries, relevant announcements, upcoming training opportunities and happenings within the General Assembly. Each month also suggests a **“Take Action”** item on a piece of legislation or issue of importance to local government.

**Advocate for The League's Legislative Priorities** – Each year, The League updates its Legislative Priorities to both meet the needs of our members and meet the realities of General Assembly action on an issue. The Legislative Priorities can be [found here](#).

**Visit The League's Website** – The legislative portion of our [website](#) is regularly updated to provide the most recent information on our priorities and other state or federal issues impacting local government. We also post our [communications](#) to the General Assembly, as well as federal updates from our partners at the National League of Cities.

**Attend League Training Opportunities** – The League offers many in person and online training opportunities to gain valuable information on a wide range of legislative and non-legislative topics. Municipal officials must take time to learn about the issues impacting them and their ability to lead their community. Learn more about our [training and development opportunities here](#).



## Become a More Effective Advocate

Now that you know how to use your position as a local official and utilize League tools to advocate for your municipality's interest, you must also understand how our Legislature works.

The next section of this toolkit will explain the make up of Pennsylvania's General Assembly. It will also describe how a bill becomes a law and how to read a bill, providing you with the tools to make you a more effective advocate.

## The Pennsylvania General Assembly

The General Assembly is bicameral, meaning it is comprised of two chambers – the PA House of Representatives and the PA Senate. It meets in legislative sessions that stretch over two years. Pennsylvania has 203 House seats and 50 Senate seats. House seats are held for a two-year term; therefore all seats are up for election or reelection every two years corresponding with the legislative session cycle. Senators hold their seats for four-year terms and terms are staggered so only half of the Senate is up for election or reelection at a time.

Pennsylvania is one of the only states with a full-time legislature. The two-year cycle begins on January 1 in odd-numbered years and expires on November 30 of the even-numbered years.

A posted session schedule lets the public know when the General Assembly is in Harrisburg for voting session on the House and Senate Floor. On a typical week, the General Assembly is "in session" Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. They return to their home districts for constituent work on Thursday and Friday, however, the session schedule can change at any time.

### Leadership

Each chamber and each caucus have their own leadership which is elected internally at the start of each two-year session. The leadership positions include: Floor Leader, Whip, Caucus Chair, Caucus Secretary, Policy Chair, Caucus Administrator and Appropriations Chair. The leaders set policy, as well as political strategy, to preserve or gain the majority party status. In addition to the above listed leaders, the House elects a Speaker who presides over the House and votes on all questions. In the Senate, the presiding officer is the Lieutenant Governor.

The Lieutenant Governor is not a member of the Senate and does not have a vote unless needed to break a tie in specific circumstances. The Senate President Pro Tempore is also a leadership position elected by his or her colleagues. The caucuses meet in private throughout the session to discuss pending legislation and typically meet every session day prior to voting on the Floor.

## Standing Committees

The standing committees receive all the bills introduced in either the House or Senate based on subject matter. Each caucus determines who will be appointed as committee chairs, as well as which members will serve on the various committees, which is oftentimes based on the background of the legislators. The leaders of the majority party and its committee chairs control the committee agendas and meeting schedules, and the majority party has more members on a committee than the minority party. The member advantage of the majority party can be a small or large margin depending on how large of a margin the majority party holds in the full body of a chamber. This margin can make moving bills especially difficult for the minority party.

The House and Senate Local Government Committees receive most of the bills impacting local government. Other committees that may receive local government legislation include: finance, urban affairs, transportation, state government, commerce, appropriations and judiciary.

## The Legislative Process – A Bill's Path to Enactment

All bills originate as ideas that come from legislators, the public, associations, local officials and any other entity wishing to address an issue, concern or problem. Once an idea is developed to the point of a legislative proposal, a member of the General Assembly begins the process by having the proposal drafted in proper bill form by the Legislative Reference Bureau.

Once drafted, a bill is either sponsored by the original legislator called the prime sponsor; or it can be offered to other legislators for co-sponsorship. In this case, the original bill is put out by the prime sponsor with a co-sponsorship memo explaining the bill and asking others to consider signing on. It is ideal for a bill to gain a bipartisan list of co-sponsors, but not necessary.

Each bill is numbered by the chief clerk of the House or Senate prior to introduction. In addition to the bill number, each bill receives a printer's number. Each time a bill is amended and reprinted, it is given a new printer's number.

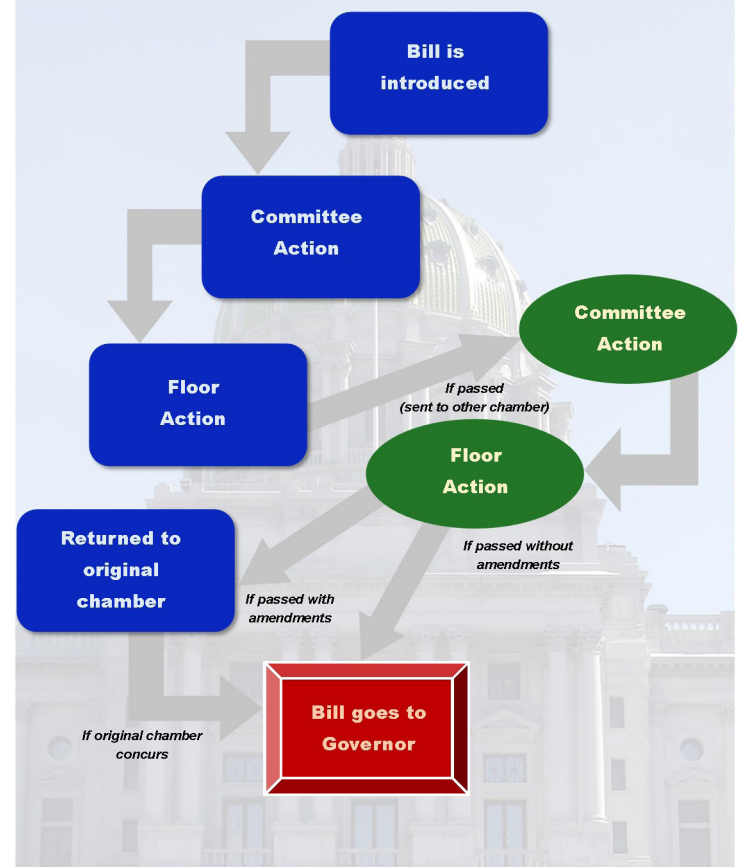
It is important to make sure you refer to a bill by using both its number and printer's number. Once numbered, a bill is assigned to a committee by either the Speaker of the House or President of the Senate.

In any given two-year session, thousands of bills are introduced and sent to committee. Many bills never move beyond their initial committee, and bills that do not make it to enactment expire at the end of the session. They must then be reintroduced in a new session in order to be considered. The League does not keep track of every bill, but we do track all those related to local government. At the end of a session, we will have several hundred bills in our system because local government issues cover such a wide array of topics. Finally, both the House and Senate have a set of rules for the operation of their chamber. The following describes the general path of a bill.

## The Role of the Committee

Every session, the General Assembly assigns each bill to a standing committee. This committee is the initial hurdle for any bill. Committees can

### How a Bill Becomes a Law





hold public hearings to discuss bills or accept testimony from stakeholders on the pros and cons of bills. Committees can also refer bills to a sub-committee for further study, amend bills, defeat them or approve them to go to the Floor for consideration by the chamber's full body. A committee's action on a particular bill can occur anytime during a two-year session. Whether a bill is considered and moved along in the process is dependent on a number of factors, most notably the advocacy efforts of supporters, the leadership of the chamber, the subject matter and policy it is addressing, and politics.

### **Consideration on the Floor**

Once a bill is reported out of a committee, it is sent to the Floor for consideration. The PA Constitution requires bills to be considered three times and on three separate session days before final passage by a chamber.

First consideration occurs on the same day a bill is reported out of committee. There is no debate or votes on the bill, simply a reading of the bill number, its title and the committee that reported it.

On second consideration, a bill's number and title are read again. Debate does not occur at this time, but amendments can be offered and adopted.

Third consideration allows full debate of a bill in addition to voting on final passage. A majority vote is needed to pass. In the House a majority is 102 of 203. In the Senate a majority is 26 of 50 votes.

Once final passage occurs in one chamber, a bill is sent to the other chamber and the same vetting process begins again. If a bill is amended in the second chamber, it must return for concurrence by the initial chamber. If the initial chamber does not concur, a conference committee is appointed. The committee is made up of three members appointed by each chamber – two from the majority and one from the minority party. The conference committee works to find a compromise that can be presented to each chamber for adoption.

### **Enactment of a Bill**

After final passage by both the House and Senate, the leader of each chamber signs the bill and then it moves on to the Governor's desk. The Governor has three choices of action when a bill arrives. It can be signed into law within 10 days, it can be allowed to automatically become law without signature after 10 days or it can be vetoed. A vetoed bill needs a two-thirds majority in both chambers to become law. The Governor's course of action on any given bill will be based on policy and politics. Once a bill becomes law, it is assigned an act number and the PA statutes are updated accordingly.

### **Public Access to Bills and the Legislative Process**

Public access to the General Assembly, legislation and the legislative process has increased greatly. Prior to the Internet, proposed legislation was only procured at the Capitol in paper form. Today, legislation can be followed on the General Assembly's website from introduction through enactment. Meeting notices are posted, as well as co-sponsorship memos, member contact information and member press releases. To help with your advocacy efforts, we recommend you use the General Assembly's website – [www.legis.state.pa.us](http://www.legis.state.pa.us) – in addition to The League's, to stay up to date. Each chamber, caucus, committee and legislator also have websites that can be useful for research. The availability of this information allows anyone to track legislation. It also allows the public to gain a better understanding of the legislative process.

### **How to Read a Bill**

Reading a bill and understanding amendments can be confusing. Please see below for an explanation.

[Light face brackets] are used only in bills amending an existing law. They indicate that anything enclosed thereby appears in the existing law, but that it is proposed to omit it from the law as amended. The brackets and anything enclosed by them are carried along into the pamphlet law version of the bill, if the bill is finally enacted; thus, the reader of the pamphlet law can tell the exact date that the bracketed material was

removed from Pennsylvania law. Bracketed language that spans more than one page is also shaded so the reader knows that the language has been marked to be removed from law.

Underscoring is used only in bills amending an existing law. It indicates that the underscored matter does not appear in the existing law, but that it is proposed to insert it in the law as amended. The underscored matter will be carried into the law if the bill is finally enacted.

Ellipses (\*\*\*) are used only in bills amending an existing law. They indicate omitted law which is not proposed to be changed in the bill.

[Dark] face brackets are used only in bills that have been amended, either in committee or on the floor of either House. They indicate brackets inserted by such amendment and have the same effect as light face brackets.

~~Strike-out type~~ is used only in bills that have been amended either in committee or on the floor of either House. They indicate that anything so printed appeared in a previous print of the bill but is to be deleted, and will not appear in the text of the law if the bill is finally enacted. ~~Strike-out type~~ is also used to remove language in an original enactment that is not yet law.

CAPITAL LETTERS are used only in bills that have been amended, either in committee or on the floor of either House. They indicate that the matter in capital letters did not appear in the original print of the bill, but was inserted into the bill by amendment in either House. The matter in capital letters will be carried into the law, if the bill is finally enacted in ordinary print, unless it is also underscored, in which case it will be printed in italics.

~~Strike-out type~~ and CAPITAL LETTERS indicate only the amendments made to the bill at the last previous state of passage. All prior ~~strike-out amendments~~ are dropped entirely from the new print and all insert amendments previously shown in CAPITAL LETTERS are reset in lower case type. The one exception to this rule is a House bill amended more than once in the Senate or a Senate bill amended more than once in the House will, on the second and subsequent printings cumulate all amendments made in the

latter House, so that all amendments in which concurrence by the House of origin is required will stand out.

The line immediately preceding the title of the bill shows the stage of passage at which the amendments appearing on that print were made. All preceding printer's numbers of each bill are shown in consecutive order in a line at the top of the first page of each bill.

## Conclusion: Go and Advocate!

You are now equipped with the tools and knowledge to advocate and create a local connection with your state legislators. You are now ready to advocate on behalf of your municipality and The League to ensure local governments have the tools and abilities to govern efficiently and effectively.

Please do not hesitate to contact The League's Governmental Affairs Department with any questions or requests for advocacy help. Amy Sturges, Deputy Executive Director – Advocacy, can be reached at [asturges@pml.org](mailto:asturges@pml.org), and Kaitlin Errickson, Governmental Affairs Manager, can be reached at [kerrickson@pml.org](mailto:kerrickson@pml.org).





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