

# Lobbying 101

Prepared by:

Commonwealth Strategy Group  
118 N. 8<sup>th</sup> Street, Richmond VA 23219  
804-484-4751 [lauren@commonwealthstrategy.net](mailto:lauren@commonwealthstrategy.net)

**The Importance of Citizen Lobbying**

In Virginia, citizens can (and should!) educate lawmakers about the importance of issues they care about. That means YOU are an invaluable resource to state legislators. When citizens take the time to learn about issues, they can provide legislators with reliable, up-to-date information that may relate to a specific piece of legislation. Letters, phone calls and emails from constituents top a legislator's list of priorities. Constituents have the power to re-elect legislators and to hold them accountable for their votes...and legislators know it. Citizen lobbyists harness this power and use it to their advantage to fight for and protect the rights they care about.

The best time to begin to cultivate a relationship with legislators is when they are not in session- in the spring, summer and fall. During this interim time, legislators are not as busy and have more time to talk about general policy issues that may not relate to a specific bill.

During session, legislators only have time to hear about specific bills, not general issues because they must hear and vote on approximately 3,000 bills in a short time; therefore, you must provide a specific bill number and committee assignment.

This is exactly why citizen lobbyists are encouraged to build relationships with their legislators BEFORE they get too busy to talk in depth with citizens. The goal is to build reciprocal relationships, where the constituents, legislators and Virginia citizens can all benefit.

# The Virginia General Assembly

The Virginia General Assembly meets annually with the session beginning on the second Wednesday in January. The legislature meets for 60 days in even-numbered years and for 30 days in odd-numbered years, with an option to extend the annual session for a maximum of 30 days (typically, the short sessions are extended to 46 days). Because they meet for such a short period of time, setting up meetings before the session begins are crucial to building a relationship with your legislator.

The General Assembly has the power to:

- Enact laws not specifically prohibited by the state or federal constitution
- Pass resolutions, including ones that initiate public policy studies
- Levy taxes
- Confirm the Governor's appointments of state agency heads and board members
- Approve the budget
- Elect State Supreme Court Justices, Court of Appeals, Circuit and District Court Judges and the members of the Judicial Inquiry and Review Commission
- Elect the Auditor of Public Accounts, the commissioners of the State Corporation Commission and members of the Virginia Workers' Compensation Commission.

## The House of Delegates

There are 100 Delegates, each elected in the odd numbered years for a two-year term. Each Delegate represents approximately 80,000 citizens. On the first day of the even numbered session following the House election cycle, the Speaker of the House is elected for a two-year term by the House members. The Speaker of the House presides over the House floor sessions, assigns members to the various committees, and refers all bills and resolutions to their respective committees.

The standing committees are: (approximately 22 delegates on each committee)

- Agriculture, Chesapeake, and Natural Resources
- Appropriations
- Commerce and Labor
- Counties, Cities and Towns
- Courts of Justice
- Education
- Finance
- General Laws
- Health, Welfare and Institutions
- Militia, Police and Public Safety
- Privileges and Elections
- Rules
- Science and Technology
- Transportation

## **The Senate**

There are 40 Senators, each elected in the odd numbered years to a four-year term. Each Senator represents approximately 200,000 citizens. The Lieutenant Governor is President of the Senate, and has no vote except to break a tie. Each session after the Senate election, members shall be assigned to standing committees for a term of four years. The Clerk of the Senate refers bills and resolutions to the committees.

The **standing committees** are: (approximately 15 senators on each committee)

- Agriculture, Conservation and natural Resources
- Commerce and Labor
- Courts of Justice
- Finance
- General Laws and Technology
- Education and Health
- Local Government
- Privileges and Elections
- Rehabilitation and Social Services
- Rules
- Transportation

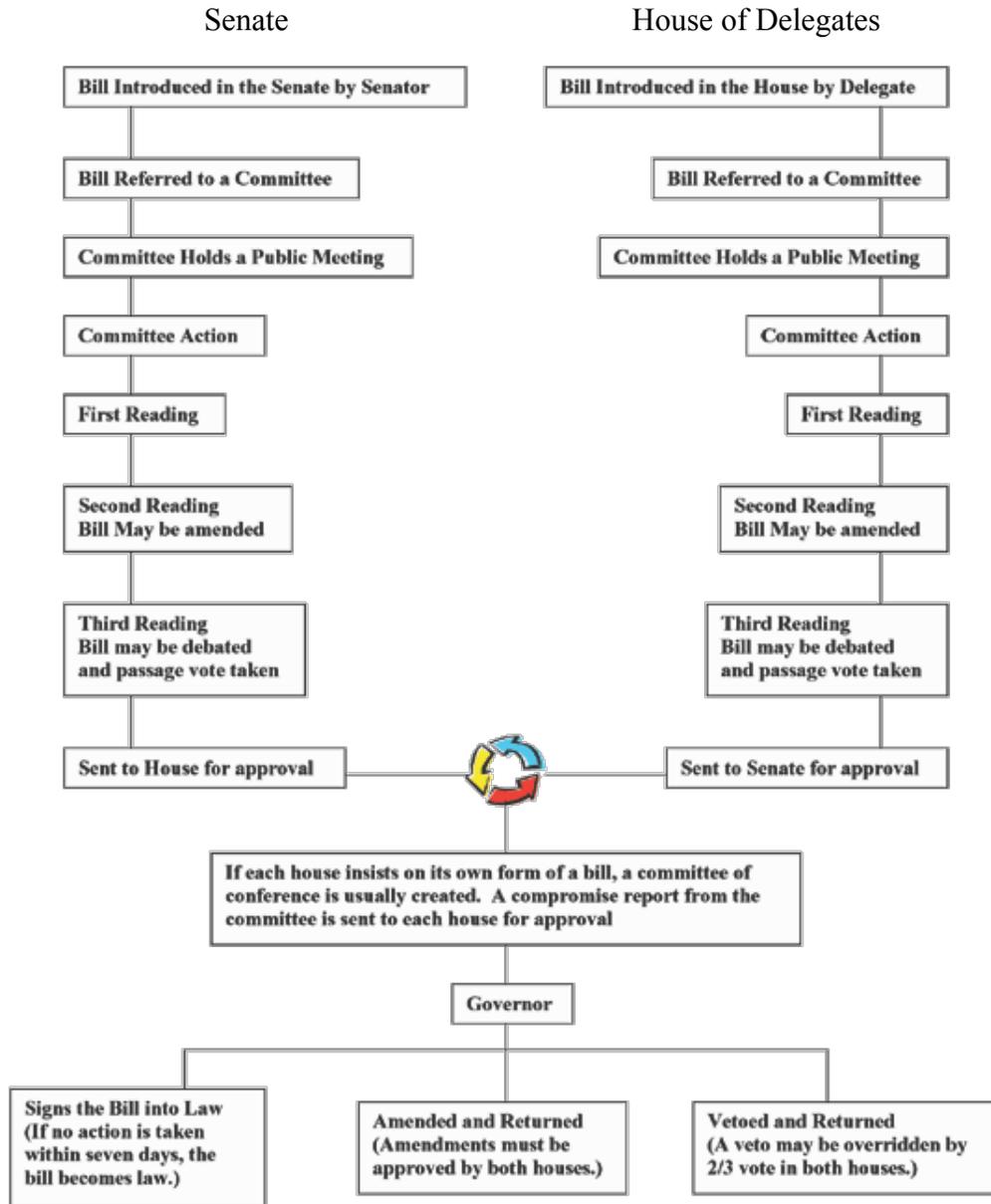
## **Division of Legislative Services**

The Division was created in 1973 to provide general staff services to the General Assembly. The staff is almost entirely attorneys who draft the legislation requested by the legislators. They also staff standing committees and legislative study commissions, providing necessary legal and research assistance.

## **The Governor**

The Governor of Virginia serves a single four-year term. The Governor acts upon legislation passed by both Houses. He/she may sign a bill into law, make suggested amendments, or veto it. The General Assembly reconvenes on the sixth Wednesday after the session adjourns to consider the Governor's actions, referred to as either the "reconvened session" or the "veto session."

# How a Bill Becomes a Law



# Communicating with Elected Officials

## General Tips for Face-to-Face Meetings

As you know, one of the most effective ways to develop a relationship with your legislator is through face-to-face visits. Most legislators have offices within their districts and have regular office hours during which they are available to their constituents. In addition, legislators have offices for the session in the General Assembly building in Richmond. However, because of the hectic legislative pace, it is more difficult to predict a legislator's availability when the General Assembly is in session. Nevertheless, if legislators know that you have traveled to Richmond, they may come off the floor of the legislature, leave a committee hearing or find some other way to meet with you. The following are some recommendations for visiting with legislators.

### Some suggestions BEFORE you meet with your legislator:

- Research your legislator. This can be done online on the Virginia General Assembly website: <http://legis.state.va.us> Once there, click on the "Delegate" link and then on their name.
  - Learn his/her full name, how long he/she has been in office and his/her full-time profession.
  - Learn about the demographics of the district, his/her voting records, committee assignments, areas of interest and biases.
  - Look at the bills he/she has introduced in the past few years. If you find something interesting, be prepared to ask questions to find out more information.
  - If you plan to discuss a particular bill, look at the bill and the votes in each house.
  - Develop some questions you can ask the legislator to gauge his/her knowledge of the social work profession.
- To meet with your legislator in the district before the session, call his/her district office number and set up an appointment.
- To meet with your legislator in Richmond during the session, call the legislator's Richmond office in advance to arrange an appointment. If an appointment cannot be scheduled, ask when the legislator is normally in the office and be there at that time.
- If you cannot meet with your legislator, meet with his/her legislative aide. Legislative aides are important sources of information, crucial conduits of information to the legislator and may have substantial influence in the design, drafting and passage of legislation. When speaking to them, act as though you are speaking to the legislator him/herself.
- It is helpful to visit your legislator in small groups. Two to four constituents is ideal. Make sure the legislator knows whom he/she will be meeting with before the visit. Designate a speaker, as everyone speaking at once can suggest dissension, and no one speaking up when the time comes suggests to the legislator that you are unprepared.
- Think of the visit as you would a typical business meeting. Plan to dress and conduct the meeting accordingly.
- Develop an agenda/talking points to help keep you on track. Limit the discussion to no more than one or two issues.
- Bring a one page, typed statement detailing your position when you visit your legislator. This fact sheet can explain the bill/issue and why he/she should support your viewpoint.

- If you are visiting to develop a relationship, bring a newsletter or other appropriate brochure to leave with the legislator.
- Be prompt for the meeting. If you are running behind schedule, call the office and let them know.
- Expect to spend approximately 15-30 minutes in the meeting. The time constraint and legislators' tendency to be "over-issued" will require you to be very specific and concise in presenting the issue.

### **During the Meeting:**

- Describe why this issue is important to you; the more personal it is, the more he/she will pay attention.
- Ask the legislator about specific issues that you know he/she has had involvement with.
- Make the issue local and relevant by discussing a recent local issue (e.g. good work that social workers are doing in the community). Use local and state statistics if you can.
- Never give inaccurate information. It is far better to tell a legislator, "**I don't know but I will find out and get back to you.**" Your credibility (and the legislator's if he/she uses your information) is at stake. Be sure to follow-up with the complete set of facts.
- Thank your legislator for a vote on another bill if possible.
- Always be courteous. Be firm in discussing the issue, but **do not become argumentative** or try to force your legislator into changing his/her position or committing to a position if he/she clearly does not want to. It is important not to alienate your legislator because you may need his/her support on later issues.
- Be careful not to let the meeting stray off course. Let the legislator make comments, but don't let him/her avoid the issue. Tactfully bring the conversation back on track.
- Be a good listener. Let your legislator ask questions as you present your viewpoint and answer them knowledgeably and factually. You do not have to agree with his/her views, but you should show that you are willing to hear them.
- Be clear about your position and what you would like your legislator to do. When relevant, identify the bill under discussion by name and number whenever possible.
- Show that you are knowledgeable about the opposition's position and arguments and respond intelligently to them.
- Ask the legislator how he/she plans to vote. Once you have presented your case, try to get a commitment. If he/she is uncertain, ask if more information would be helpful and be sure to follow through.
- Try not to take notes during the meeting. Make them immediately afterward while the flow of the conversation is still fresh in your mind.
- Leave your business card or contact information with the legislator or their aide.

**After the Meeting:**

- Thank your legislator for his/her time, both at the meeting and in writing. Regardless of his/her position, courtesy is important. A handwritten thank you note also gives you another chance to make your pitch.

**General Tips for Email Communication**

Legislators read their email, especially when they are personalized and clearly from a constituent. The following guidelines should be used when writing to your Delegate.

**Address emails to Delegates in the following manner:**

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
District address or General Assembly Address

Start your letter in the following manner: “Dear Delegate \_\_\_\_\_”

The signature at the end of your email should include your full address, zip code, and email address.

**Contents of the email:**

- Identify the issue or bill name/number at the top of the letter.
- Identify yourself as a constituent and refer to your district meeting.
- Get right to the point—state your position and /or your request and be specific (“I hope that you will support/oppose HB\_\_\_”)
- Personalize your email. Form emails are not as effective as individual emails.
- Give reasons for supporting or opposing the measure and if possible, relate its impact in the legislator’s home district.
- Offer your assistance (provide more information).
- Thank him/her for considering your position.

**Keep in mind:**

- Keep the email short.
- Remember that you are the expert—be informative
- Use terms the legislator will understand—avoid abbreviations

**Follow up:**

- Email your Delegate to thank him/her for his/her time and to restate your position. If applicable, thank him/her for a favorable vote. This type of follow through can help build a continuing relationship.

## **General Tips for Telephone Calls**

A phone call to a legislator's office is a legitimate and common method of constituent lobbying. Before making the phone call, develop a clear and concise list of points you want to make. If the legislator is unavailable to take the call speak to the legislative aide or secretary.

### **Remember:**

- Be brief.
- Give your name and address.
- Use the bill number.
- Indicate your position.
- Ask the legislator for a favorable vote.
- Thank the secretary or aide.
- Be prepared to leave a detailed message including many of the points above on voicemail or an answering machine.

### **Follow up:**

- Send a thank you note to thank him/her for his/her time and to restate your position. If applicable, thank him/her for a favorable vote. This type of follow through can help build a continuing relationship.