

Making Your Voice Heard

How You Can Influence Government Decisions

“...Of the people, by the people, for the people...”

Democracy is not a spectator sport.
Active citizens do make a difference.



A publication of the League of Women Voters of Illinois Education Fund

You have a say in shaping the laws that govern our state. Voice your concerns effectively by following the basic principles covered in this booklet. Apply the same principles when you communicate with your local government and with our leaders in Washington, DC.

Reach for this booklet whenever you want to send a message to government decision makers — whether they are elected to public office or employed in government agencies.

Is Anyone Listening?

Legislators are your elected officials; they work for you. During a typical year, thousands of bills are introduced. No single legislator can be well-informed on all of them. Legislators count on ideas and information from their constituents, using that input to improve state laws. If you think a proposed law misses the mark or a new law is needed, share your ideas.

Do I Have to Be an Expert?

No. Legislators are most interested in how a bill will affect the people in their home districts; let them know how you will be impacted by the proposal.

Who Do I Tell?

The legislative power of the State of Illinois is vested in the General Assembly which consists of two chambers, the **Senate** and the **House of Representatives**. You are represented by one person in each house. To find out who represents you in Springfield, go to www.ilga.gov and click on “Legislator Lookup.”

The Governor and the state agency heads also play a role in making and carrying out laws in Illinois. There are times when contacting them is also effective.

The Best Times to Lobby

The best time to contact your elected representatives about legislation is when a session has started and the bill has been introduced. Make the contact as early as possible in the process — when your legislator is more likely to be open to changes. However, until a final vote is cast, it is never too late to make your views known.

Even after a bill passes the General Assembly, you can continue to have an impact by urging the Governor to either sign or veto it. In the event the Governor issues a veto, you can contact your legislators and ask them to uphold or override the Governor’s action.

How An Idea Becomes a Law

The process can appear complicated but you don't need to know all the details to lobby effectively. Here's an overview of the process:

FIRST CHAMBER *(either the House or Senate)*

For an idea to be considered by the General Assembly, it must be written in bill form and sponsored by at least one legislator. It is given a number, then introduced on the floor of the sponsor's chamber, the House or the Senate. It is then assigned to a legislative committee, where it can be scheduled for a hearing and possibly changed (amended). If the committee approves the bill, it goes back to the floor for consideration by the full chamber and, sometimes, further amendment. If it passes, it moves to the other chamber.

SECOND CHAMBER

The bill repeats the above process in the other chamber. If it is changed, it must go back to the originating chamber for agreement. If agreement is denied, it may be referred to a conference committee to resolve differences, then go back again to each chamber. A bill must pass both chambers - in identical form - before it can be sent to the Governor.

THE GOVERNOR

If the Governor signs a bill or takes no action on it, the bill becomes a law. If the Governor rejects a bill (*total veto*) or alters it (*amendatory veto*), it goes back to the legislature.

FALL VETO SESSION

A **total veto** may be overridden by the General Assembly by a 3/5 majority vote of both houses and the bill as originally written becomes law. If the General Assembly does not override it, the bill dies.

An **amendatory veto** may also be overridden by a 3/5 majority vote of both



houses, in which case the bill as originally passed by the General Assembly becomes law. If both chambers accept an amendatory veto, the amended bill becomes law. The bill dies if the General Assembly neither accepts nor overrides an amendatory veto.

Where and How to Reach Out

It is not necessary to go to the state capitol in Springfield while the General Assembly is in session to get your message across. Legislators also have offices in their home districts. They welcome communication from their constituents at either location. You may contact them in writing — by sending an email or letter — or verbally — by scheduling an office visit or making a phone call.

Tips for Communicating with Your Legislators

Some basic same principles apply no matter how you contact your government official:

- **Identify** yourself and give your home address when phoning and writing.
- **Describe** the issue or bill that concerns you.
- Refer to the exact **bill number** if possible.
- Tell the legislator what **action** you would like taken.
- Mention any **relevant credentials** or background you have.
- State key **reasons** for your views and be brief, clear and concise.
- Make it **personal**; explain how you, your family or community will be impacted.
- Stick to the **facts**; don't stretch the truth.
- Limit each communication to **one issue** or bill so you have more impact.
- Be **courteous and respectful**; keep the door open for future communication.
- **Listen** to the office holder's views and stay open to compromise. The issue may not be as clear cut as you believe and some progress toward your goal can be better than none.
- Ask for a **reply**.
- Be **patient but persistent**. Don't expect an immediate commitment, but follow up after your initial contact.
- Send a **thank you** or follow up letter when appropriate.
- Know the Rules: **Never promise campaign contributions or give gifts to officials.**

Additional suggestions for successful phone calls or visits with your legislator:

- Legislators are often in their home offices on Mondays and Fridays during session.
- If they are not available, ask to speak to their legislative aide. Leave your name, address and message with that aide.
- Make an appointment or ask for a return call if you wish to have a direct discussion.
- Have your talking points ready and focus on the issue.
- Cultivate cordial relationships with the staff as well as with the legislator.

One Minute Lobbying

When time is short...

A telephone call or email is a quick and simple way to take action.

by Phone

Receptionist: Good morning. Senator Paul Tishun's office.

You: Hi, my name is Jane Q. Public and I live at 100 Main Street in Hometown.

Receptionist: How may I help you?

You: I am calling to urge Senator Tishun to vote for Senate Bill 550, which requires police to trace guns used by young people in committing crimes. I think firearm tracing is an important step in keeping guns out of the hands of children and reducing violent crimes.

Receptionist: I will let the Senator know.

You: Thank you.

End of call.

by Email

Dear Senator Tishun,

I am sending this email today to ask you to continue to support Senate Bill 550, which requires police to trace guns used by young people in committing crimes. I think firearm tracing is an important step in keeping guns out of the hands of children and I support your effort in bringing this legislation to the General Assembly.

Thank you.

Jane Q. Public, 100 Main Street, Hometown, IL 60457



Illinois Legislative Resources Are at Your Fingertips: Use the Illinois General Assembly Website

www.ilga.gov

- All Bills, Resolutions and Public Acts with full language, status of movement through the current General Assembly and all Roll Calls
- Bills that came before the General Assembly in the past several years
- Legislator Lookup — find out who represents you
- Legislators' office contact information, committee assignments, biographies, and authored and co-sponsored bills
- Session Schedule
- Legislative reports from special commissions, e.g., COGFA (Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability)
- Freedom of Information Act procedures
- Live audio and video feed of sessions in both chambers
- The Illinois Constitution
- Illinois Statutes

For similar information about the United States Congress,
visit **Thomas.loc.gov**

Stay Well Informed About Proposed Legislation

- Decide which bills you wish to follow.
- Read the synopsis and check the sponsors.
- Know the status of the bill — where it is in the legislative process and whether it has been amended.
- Read all amendments — they often change the content of legislation.
- If a bill is headed for a committee hearing, consider submitting testimony or contacting the committee members.
- Keep an eye on your bills and track their movement through the chambers, to the Governor and back if there is a veto.

How to Track a Bill's Progress Online

- Go to www.ilga.gov
- Identify your bills of interest by using the search boxes on the left-hand side. Search by using a keyword or bill number (House bills begin with HB and Senate bills begin with SB).
- Check the weekly status and, towards the end of the legislative session in late May, the daily status.
 - Use “Last Action” to determine where your bill is on that date.
 - Scroll down to find any amendments. Review to see what changes the amendments made to the bill.
- Bills vetoed by the Governor will return to the General Assembly for the Fall Veto Session and possible veto override.
- Vetoed bills will usually have an explanation for the veto from the Governor on the website.
- Bills signed into law receive a Public Act number (PA #) and should have a date as to when it becomes effective.

How Can I Have More Impact?

There is strength in numbers. Reaching out to others is the best way to amplify your message:

- Write a letter to your local newspaper or post a comment on your online news outlet.
- Ask friends, neighbors, and colleagues to contact their legislators.
- Join a group working on your issue.
- Exchange views with candidates.

What if I Don't Succeed?

Try Again! Good ideas can take a while to show up on the legislative radar. Increasing legislators' awareness of an issue and establishing your own credibility can help lay the groundwork for future success.



**Want More Help Making Your Voice Heard?
Contact the League of Women Voters of Illinois at:
www.lwvill.org**

As a nonpartisan political organization, we encourage individuals to play an informed and active role in government. Working at local, state and national levels, we welcome men and women to join us as we work together to influence public policy.



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