Alabama's Legislative Process: Get Involved

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Most people recognize the vital role that voting plays in a democracy – even if they don't vote. But fewer understand the citizen's role in lawmaking. Using your power as a constituent to influence legislators is called *lobbying*.

It is extremely difficult to win passage of a public interest bill that isn't supported by a well-funded special interest group. Arise promotes its special interest – the well-being of low-income Alabamians – not by "wining and dining" lawmakers but by presenting well-researched policy analysis and the strong voice of Arise members who live in their districts. Use this fact sheet to sharpen your skills as a citizen lobbyist.

How the legislative process works

State officers (Governor, Lieutenant Governor, etc.) and members of the Legislature are elected every four years. The four-year cycle is called a *quadrennium*. Current office-holders were elected in 2010.

The Alabama Legislature has two chambers.

- The *Senate* has 35 members (senators) from the 35 Senate districts. The presiding officer is the Lieutenant Governor. In his or her absence, the role is filled by the President Pro Tempore (president "for a time"), called President Pro Tem for short, who is elected from the Senate by its members at the start of the quadrennium.
- The *House of Representatives* has 105 members (representatives) from the 105 House districts. The presiding officer is the Speaker of the House, elected from the chamber by its members at the start of each quadrennium. The Speaker Pro Tem presides in the Speaker's absence.

The annual period when the Legislature meets is called the legislative session.

- The session begins on the first Tuesday in March in the first year of a quadrennium, the first Tuesday in February in the second and third years, and the first Tuesday in January in the fourth year. The 2012 session begins February 7.
- The Legislature meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays for a maximum of 30 meeting days within a period of 105 calendar days. Committees meet on Wednesdays. The latest allowable legislative day for the 2012 regular session is May 21.
- The Governor may call a *special session,* indicating in a written "call" the subjects to be considered. No legislation on other subjects may be enacted during a special session unless approved by a two-thirds vote in both houses. A special session may last up to 12 days within a 30-day calendar span.

The main work of the Legislature is passing laws. Around 3,000 bills and resolutions are introduced each year. Some 40 percent of these are local in nature. About 180 to 200 general bills pass each year. Of these, only about 18 to 20 affect the entire state. It often takes four years to pass a bill on a new subject.

The process of proposing and passing laws is similar in the House and the Senate, and every new law must pass in both chambers.

- A member of either chamber introduces a *bill* – a proposal for a new law. It can be introduced in both chambers at the same time by a member in each.
- It gets a *first reading* (usually by title only) and is referred to a committee by the presiding officer.
- The committee considers the bill – in a public hearing, if the committee chair receives a written request for one. A bill that passes committee is "reported out" to the full chamber in a *second reading* (usually by number only) and placed on the General Calendar for the next meeting day.
- On the next meeting day, the bill becomes eligible for its *third reading* and debate. The volume of bills, however, prevents most from being considered promptly. The Rules Committee places high-priority bills on the Special Order Calendar.
- The bill gets its third reading (by number only unless a member requests a full reading, usually as a delaying tactic) when its number comes up in the assigned sequence on the Special Order or General Calendar. Debate in the full chamber begins at this time. When debate ends, the members vote on the bill.
- After the bill passes one chamber, it goes to the other chamber and the process repeats.
- Once a bill passes both chambers, it goes to the Governor to be *signed* (approved) or *vetoed* (rejected).
- If vetoed, it is sent back to the Legislature, where a simple majority vote can *override* (reverse) the veto.
- If the Governor signs the bill or the Legislature overrides a veto, the bill becomes an *act,* or law.

How you can influence the process

Before a bill is introduced:

- Be informed about issues that are important to your group or community.
- Work with organizations that research issues and recommend policy changes.

- Talk to your legislators about introducing bills on issues important to your group or community.
- Write letters to the newspapers concerning issues that are important to your group or community.

When a bill is in committee:

- Contact committee members and ask them to support, reject or amend (change) the bill – especially if your legislator serves on the committee.
- Ask others to contact committee members.
- Find out about and attend public hearings.
- Testify for or against the bill. Arise lines up people to show a range of support or opposition.

When the bill is being debated on the floor:

- Ask your legislators to support, reject or amend it.
- Ask family and friends to contact their legislators and request that they support, reject or amend the bill.
- Write letters to the newspaper about the bill.

When a bill awaits the Governor's signature:

- Call or write, urging the Governor to sign or veto.
- Ask family and friends to contact the Governor.

Make your influence more effective

Plan your call. Before contacting your legislator by phone, prepare an informal "script":

- Give your name and where you live.
- Identify the general reason for your call – for example, "I'd like to talk with you about Medicaid."
- Mention that you're a member of Arise and that our members are interested in the issue (to the legislator, this means voters!).
- Refer to a specific piece of pending legislation, if there is one, including the bill number.
- Make it personal – tell a brief story or say why it matters to you.
- Ask them to vote for the bill and where (mentioning a particular committee or floor vote suggests that you may even be there to watch!).
- Thank them in advance.

Try for direct contact. Legislators like to talk to voters. Find contact information by calling (334) 242-7600 (House) or (334) 242-7800 (Senate) or by visiting *arisecitizens.org* and clicking on "Find your legislators" (9-digit ZIP Code required). If you get a legislator's secretary or answering machine, that's okay – your message will get through. In this case, you must be even briefer – leave out the story. No matter what kind of response you get, remain courteous. Anger doesn't persuade.

Enlist other people to call with a similar message. Legislators know that every phone call is the "tip of an iceberg" – for every person who takes the time to call, there are many others who share the caller's concerns. Think of the number of votes you will portray if 10 people – or even 20 – call on the same issue.

Take time to write a letter – legislators *do* read their mail. (Many legislators also use e-mail, and some legislative web pages list an address. Be sure your subject line is simple and informative so it won't resemble junk mail.) You can write to any legislator by using the following address: Alabama State House; Montgomery, AL 36130. Remember:

- Use your own words. Form letters are easy to recognize and less effective than personal statements.
- Both handwritten and typed letters are fine.
- Include the same information you would cover in a phone call, as noted above.
- Limit your letter to one page, in most cases.
- Put letter-writing on your group's agenda. Keep paper, envelopes, pens, stamps and addresses handy.

As long as you're writing, remember your local newspaper. A letter to the editor will put your issue in the minds of many people. Some will be inspired to write their own letters, supporting your points. Legislators regularly read this section to find out what their constituents are thinking.

Make your voice more "real" with a face and a handshake. Get to know your legislators personally:

- Arrange a time to introduce your group as active constituents – don't wait until you have an issue to press.
- Make a point to speak to them whenever you see them in public – at ballgames, the grocery store, etc.
- Attend events where they are speaking.
- Wear a name tag to every meeting.
- Always tell them your name clearly and add a quick memory tag – for example, "My daughter goes to your child's school," or "I enjoyed your speech at the Kiwanis Club last Thursday."
- Invite them to your meeting – but remember how busy they are during the legislative session!
- Help your group arrange a legislative reception.
- Visit the State House during the legislative session.
- Praise them when they deserve it and respectfully express disapproval when they don't.

For more information: Visit the Legislature's website, *www.legislature.state.al.us,* and select "Legislative Process" to find an extensive, easy-to-use guide prepared by the Secretary of State. Contact Arise to learn more about speaking out and being heard on issues affecting low-income Alabamians.

This fact sheet was prepared by Melissa Oliver and Jim Carnes. It may be used with acknowledgment of Arise Citizens' Policy Project, P. O. Box 1188, Montgomery, AL 36101; (800) 832-9060; www.arisecitizens.org.