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UNDERSTANDING THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS



"WE THOUGHT JUST SHOWING UP IN HEARINGS WAS HOW IT'S DONE. REALLY, IT'S OFFICE VISITS WITH KEY LEGISLATORS, FOLLOWING UP ON THAT, AND CRAFTING YOUR MESSAGE THE RIGHT WAY."

**ROB WUDLICK (MN)
UNITED SPINAL REGIONAL ADVOCACY COORDINATOR
2019 FINN BULLERS CO-ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR**

LEGISLATION VS REGULATION

Despite being often used interchangeably, these words refer to different things

Laws are passed by either Congress or state legislatures. The legislature creates bills that become law once passed by a vote. Laws establish the general framework of principles in which a government will act.

Regulations are standards and rules that govern how laws will be enforced. They are often issued by the administrative agencies responsible for enacting the laws. Regulations are also codified and published, like laws.





FROM CITY COUNCIL TO SENATORS



Federal, state, and local governments all make laws, but each level has different legislative responsibilities. It's important for advocates to understand the role of their elected representatives and what they can do for you:

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVES

Your representatives at the Federal level are in Congress—the House and Senate. Your Members of Congress are responsible for passing legislation that impacts the entire country (e.g. amendments to the ADA or federal health care policy).

STATE REPRESENTATIVES

State government mirrors federal government in that there are legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government. The State legislature has both an upper and a lower house with State Senators and State House or Assembly members. These representatives enact laws for their state.



LOCAL REPRESENTATIVES

Local representatives handle administration of towns, cities, municipalities, counties, and districts. Local government runs things that impact our daily lives, like utilities, libraries, emergency services, and law enforcement.



HOW THE U.S. CONGRESS WORKS

Congress, the bicameral legislature of the Federal Government has 535 voting members and consists of two chambers chosen through direct election. The House of Representatives and Senate are equal partners, with all legislation requiring the consent of both chambers before any action.

The House of Representatives: 435 voting members, and six nonvoting members representing Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, US Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia. Members serve two-year terms representing the people of a single constituency, known as a district. Congressional districts are apportioned to states by population using the U.S. Census results

Unique powers of the House: Initiation of impeachment cases and revenue raising bills

The Senate: 100 voting senators are elected at-large in their state for a six-year term. All states, regardless of population or size, have two senators and terms are staggered so that every two years approximately 1/3 of the Senate is up for reelection.

Unique powers of the Senate: treaty ratification, approval of presidential appointments, impeachment decisions

Once any legislation has passed both through the House and Senate, it is then put in front of the President of the United States to be signed into law or vetoed.



HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW



Step 1: Bill Introduced Any Member of Congress, either a Senator or Representative, may introduce a bill. It is then assigned a bill number and sent to the committee with jurisdiction over the area affected.

Step 2: Committee Action The committee as a whole may consider the bill or be referred to a subcommittee. Public hearings are usually held to hear various viewpoints on the bill. The committee can vote to report (approve) the bill, with or without amendment, or to kill it.

Step 3: House Floor Consideration If the committee votes to report the bill, it is sent to the floor of the full House. Members may debate the bill and offer amendments. The House then votes on final passage. A bill that is defeated will go no further in the process. A bill that is passed will then go to the other House of Congress.

Step 4: Second House In the second House of Congress, a bill usually goes through the same steps as outlined above. This House may vote to pass the bill, with or without amendments, or to defeat it.

Step 5: Resolving Differences If the two houses pass a different bill, a conference committee will usually be appointed with both House and Senate members. This committee attempts to work out the differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. If the committee reaches agreement, a revised bill is sent back to both houses for a vote. The House and the Senate must approve it.

Step 6: Presidential Action - Final Approval After both the House and the Senate have passed a bill in identical form, it is sent to the President. The President may sign the bill into law or allow the bill to become law by letting it sit for 10 days while Congress is in session. If the President disagrees with a bill, he may veto it and send it back to Congress. If the bill receives 2/3 vote or greater to override the veto, in both Houses, the bill becomes law.

REASONS TO GET INVOLVED WITH FEDERAL POLITICS

There are ample reasons why someone might want to get involved in Federal advocacy and/or public policy. Federalism refers to a mixed mode of government, combining central or 'federal' government with regional governments (state, territorial or other subunit governments) in a single political system.

What is public policy?

Public assistance programs, legislation such as the Affordable Care Act, environmental laws, etc. A public policy is not simply a passed law or regulation. Instead, it includes the beliefs and attitudes that result in the passage of a law or regulation.

Getting involved at the Federal level means engaging with Congress and with the various agencies that make up the Federal Government, such as the Department of Transportation, the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services.

One individual can make a big impact at the Federal level. You can:

1. Call attention to issues of importance;

In response, a Senator or Representative may address your issue on the floor,

- talk to their colleagues, talk to the press, attend one of your events

- In addition, the head of a Department, may make some administrative changes within their Department due to hearing from advocates

2. Ask a Senator, Representative or Department head to introduce a piece of legislation or regulation to fix an issue

DID YOU KNOW?

Senators and Representatives are elected and expected to represent the wants and needs of their constituents. Members of the legislature are not the only ones with the power to create new laws. Anyone can propose an idea for a bill in your state and get involved with the political process.



Above, United Spinal member advocates encourage Arizona legislators to write a bill that requires a minimum number of wheelchair accessible bathrooms in apartment buildings during their Roll on Arizona event.

“We want to ensure that the accessibility issues that affect the health and safety of people with disabilities, including entering and exiting buildings quickly and having access to bathroom facilities, are addressed.”

- Gina Schuh (AZ), United Spinal Advocate



HOW STATE LEGISLATURES WORK

Each state, except Nebraska, uses a bicameral legislature structured similarly to the federal legislator, utilizing two separate legislative chambers or houses. One, called the Senate, that is also known as the “upper house.” In 41 states, the larger chamber is called the House of Representatives, but a number of states use the term “Assembly” or the “House of Delegates.” In Nebraska, they use a one-chamber legislator called the Senate.

The Senate: Generally, but not always, has the exclusive power to confirm appointments made by the governor and to try articles of impeachment. In most cases, this smaller chamber represents more citizens and serves longer terms. Often, 4 years.

The House of Representatives/Assembly/House of Delegates:

Customarily has the exclusive power to initiate taxing legislation and articles of impeachment. This larger chamber usually serves terms of 2 years.

In the majority of states, once any legislation has passed through both the upper and lower chambers, it is then put in front of the Governor be signed into law or vetoed.

Each state has a different legislative session. [Click here to find out when your state is in session.](#)

REASONS TO GET INVOLVED WITH STATE POLITICS

Think globally, act locally.

- 1. Lawmakers are more accessible.** State and local legislators have more time to speak with you over the phone or meet in person.
- 2. There is a lot to learn at the state level.** At the state level, policy teams are innovative idea creators, tackling issues deeply from a variety of angles.
- 3. Ideas move quickly in the states.** Legislative attention and progress in one state, can quickly spread and be adopted by other states.
- 4. You can get ahead.** Federal work can be reactive, while the work being done at the state level is often proactive.
- 5. States have more freedom.** Unlike the federal government, states are less dictated by pressures and mandates that restrict change. States are often where the action is.





FINDING YOUR PLACE AT THE POLITICAL TABLE

Create change locally by being directly involved in the political process

Go to Meetings

A great way to get to know your local political leaders and new candidates, is to attend and participate in your town and county political committee meetings. These meetings are usually open to anyone and provide a great opportunity for you to not only get to know other active constituents, but also to learn about issues facing your community.

Join an Advisory Board, Task Force, local planning board, or Apply for Commissionership

By committing to a public service committee or council, you can work with other community members and share your unique perspectives on issues and how they affect your life. You can contribute by doing research, taking public testimony, reviewing reports, and creating recommendations for local problems.

Run for Office

The pinnacle of involvement in local party politics is running for office yourself. Think about running for party offices, as well as, civic offices, such as judge of elections, school board, or town council.

ADVOCATES IN ACTION: GETTING POLITICAL



NICK LIBASSI
FORMER VICE PRESIDENT OF PARTNERSHIP
EXPANSION FOR UNITED SPINAL
CURRENT VICE PRESIDENT, NORTH AMERICA,
MOBIUS MOBILITY

Elected to Rochelle Park, New Jersey, Township committee in 2018. Nick shares,

"I decided to run for office because it is not enough to sit on the sidelines. You have to be willing to work towards making things better, whether it is accessibility, disability or issues that have nothing to do with either it was important to me to be active and try to make the changes that I feel are needed."

JOSE HERNANDEZ
UNITED SPINAL ASSOCIATION OF NYC CHAPTER
PRESIDENT

Appointed New York City Commissioner of Civic Engagement in 2019. Jose shares,

"Living with a disability, I have always recognized the importance of advocating. However, it wasn't until I attended Roll on Capitol Hill that I understood how much our voices as individuals with disabilities resonate when we come together. As a commissioner, I use my experience and passion for advocacy to encourage others with disabilities to get involved in their communities too."



ALEX WATTERS
UNITED SPINAL ADVOCATE

Appointed to Sioux City, Iowa, City Council in 2017,
elected at large in 2017, and reelected in 2021. Alex shares,

"After volunteering and working on a number of political campaigns, I witnessed the difference that can be made by holding public office. As an elected official, not only do you have the ability to introduce policies or legislation, but you also have a platform to shine a spotlight on inequities experienced by yourself or other marginalized populations."

