



# A Guide to Being an Effective Citizen Lobbyist

The decisions made during the biennial sessions of the Nevada State Legislature have a deep and lasting impact on our state's people and communities. As new laws are created and others are repealed or rewritten, it is important to ensure that these changes preserve and strengthen our constitutional rights. The ACLU of Nevada monitors a wide range of issues at the legislature. Our education, organizing, and lobbying efforts are aimed at informing both lawmakers and the public about the civil rights and civil liberties implications of the bills proposed by our elected officials.

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## THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Your elected officials are citizens of Nevada, just like you.
- There is no wrong way to lobby if you stay on message.
- Practice what you want to say with family and friends first.
- The goal is not to get legislators and other elected officials to like you. The goal is for them to see you as a member of their community.
- Everyone in a democratic society has the right to participate in government processes and require accountability from their elected officials.
- You are no longer a spectator but a key player in the democratic process.
- Your voice matters. You have the tools, talents, and capabilities to address your concerns and expectations with your elected officials.



*Nevada Legislative Building*

## CITIZEN LOBBYISTS ARE KEY

The citizen lobbyist has existed nearly as long as democratic government itself. The term "lobbying" originates from the early practice of attempting to influence legislators in the lobby outside of the legislative chambers before a vote.

The function of any lobbyist or lobbying campaign is basically the same: educate, advocate, and participate. Contrary to popular perception, lobbying does not need to be complicated or expensive.

People are often hesitant to get involved in the political process for several reasons. People believe legislators only listen to high-powered lobbyists and big donors, they don't think legislation will affect their lives directly, or they don't understand how the process works. But the single most important factor in influencing how a legislator votes on a bill is constituent support. And since very few people take the time to contact their legislators, one visit, one phone call, or one letter from a constituent speaks volumes.

**To find information about specific bills, hearing schedules, and how to contact your legislator, visit the Nevada Legislature's website [www.leg.state.nv.us](http://www.leg.state.nv.us)**

## UNDERSTANDING THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

Without a doubt, the most important tool for monitoring the legislature is to understand how it works.

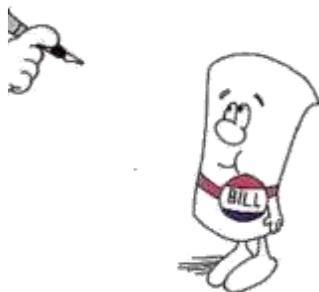
In Nevada, there are 63 legislators in two houses: 42 members of the Assembly, and 21 members of the Senate. In odd-numbered years, the legislature meets for 120 days beginning on the first Monday in February. During this time, potential laws, known as bills, are introduced in each house. There, committees hold public hearings, debate the bill language, make changes to its text, and vote whether to send the bill to the full chamber. If the bill passes out of committee, it is then sent to the Assembly or Senate floor to be read, debated and voted on. A bill usually requires a simple majority to pass – 22 votes in the Assembly or 11 votes in the Senate.

If a bill starts in and passes out of the Assembly, it then goes through the same process in the Senate, and vice versa. When both the Assembly and the Senate pass a bill, it is sent to the governor for his signature or veto. If the governor signs the bill, it becomes law. If the bill is vetoed, the legislature can override the governor's veto with a two-thirds vote in both houses.

Committee hearings offer citizens the best opportunity to participate and voice their opinions through testimony, emails, telephone calls, and letters. If a citizen is interested in a particular bill, they may contact committee staff to schedule their testimony. They can also attend committee meetings and testify in person when the chair asks for comments from the public. A citizen lobbyist can and should make their opinions known to all members on the committee, even the committee member is not their representative.

A great opportunity for a citizen to reach out to his or her own representative and make their voice heard is when a bill is approved by committee and heads to the Senate or Assembly floor.

Finally, when a bill reaches the Governor's desk, a citizen can contact him or her and ask that the bill be either signed or vetoed.



## BEING A CITIZEN LOBBYIST

Nevada legislators have offices in the state legislative building in Carson City. Some officials are accessible to the community at their home or work and some prefer that their constituents contact them only at their legislative office. During the legislative session, state officials spend most of their time in the legislative building and are easily accessible by email or by phone.

Elected officials spend a lot of time and money to measure public opinion in their districts. They count votes, count contributions to their campaigns, and also count phone calls, emails, letters, and personal visits.

Most elected officials emphasize constituent contact because it helps direct their voting behavior. Even if your public official is supportive of your issues, you should still call, visit, or write, since they will hear the other side too. Elected officials need to hear how important an issue is from their constituents.

### ELECTED OFFICIALS WANT TO KNOW:

- ✓ Which constituents support or do not support an issue
- ✓ How many constituents support or do not support an issue
- ✓ Why their constituents support or do not support an issue
- ✓ How an issue impacts the constituents in their district

## CALLING YOUR LEGISLATOR

The Nevada Legislature's website lists each legislator's contact information so you can call them at their legislative office or at home. Legislators pay attention to phone calls and consider support or opposition to bills. Phone calls are most useful when a vote has been scheduled and there isn't time for a letter or visit.

### THE PHONE CALL

- Phone calls will most likely be received by office staff who will then pass your message on to the legislator.
- Be polite.
- When speaking about an elected official, use his or her title and last name, such as Senator Smith, Assemblyman Johnson, or Assemblywoman Thomson.
- Give your name and address to verify that you live in the legislator's district.
- Stick to one subject/topic per call.
- Keep your phone call short and simple:
  - “I support (bill number/name), because (list 2 or 3 bullet points), and I urge (legislator's name) to vote for this bill.”
  - “I do not support (bill number/name), because (list 2 or 3 bullet points), and I urge (legislator's name) to vote against this bill.”
- If you are calling to request information about the legislator's position, your call will likely be transferred to a staff person or intern working with the legislator. If the staff person doesn't know the position, ask them to find out and get back to you.
  - “I am interested in finding out (legislator's name) position on (bill number/name), could you please get that information for me and call or email me back? Thank you.”
- If the issue isn't pending, it is still important to be brief and concise in your conversation. Be prepared to state your position, what you want the legislator to do, and be ready to back up your position with one or two supporting arguments.
  - “I understand that (bill number/name) might be introduced this legislative session. I support (bill number/name), because (list 2-3 bullet points), and I urge (legislator's name) to vote for this bill.”
  - “I understand that (bill number/name) might be introduced this legislative session. I do not support (bill number/name), because (list 2-3 bullet points), and I urge (legislator's name) to vote against this bill.”

## WRITING YOUR LEGISLATOR

As constituents, it is important to stay in written contact with your elected officials. Elected officials use letters as one way to measure public opinion in their district.



Their offices count the pieces of mail and email FOR and AGAINST every issue.

### TIPS FOR WRITING LETTERS AND EMAILS

- In your first paragraph, state your name, that you are the elected official's constituent, your position on a bill or issue, and exactly what you want the legislator to do.
- Cover ONE subject per letter. Write more than one letter if you have multiple issues.
- Always identify the issue you are writing about by including its bill number and name.
- Describe the legislation and how it affects you. Tell about your own experiences. Elected officials want to know how a bill or proposal will impact the lives of their constituents.
- Have a clear and concise message. Check the ACLU of Nevada website or call our office for talking points.
- If you know your legislative representative's position on an issue, include it. This demonstrates to the legislator that you are serious and are keeping a close watch on the progress of the bill. You can find this information by following news stories and talking to your representatives.
- Request a reply, you are more likely to receive a reply if you ask for one.
- If you receive a reply that supports your position, write back and thank your elected official.
- If you receive a reply that does not support your position, write and explain your position again to the elected official, help them better understand your concerns.
- Always thank the elected official for their time in responding to you.

## PARTICIPATING IN COMMITTEE HEARINGS

Committee meetings always include time for the public to express their views.

Your participation in a committee hearing can make a big impact. Public testimony can influence the committee's action and becomes part of the permanent record.

Agendas are posted online in advance of the committee meetings and can be found on the Nevada Legislature's website: [www.leg.state.nv.us](http://www.leg.state.nv.us).

### BE FAMILIAR WITH THE COMMITTEE PROCESS

- Know the meeting time and location. These can be found on the committee meeting's agenda.
- Be flexible. Assume the meeting will take longer than the scheduled time.
- Before arriving to the meeting, check to make sure that the issue you are following has not been removed from the agenda.
- The bill or issue that you are interested in may not be heard first. Agenda items are also sometimes taken out of order.
- Before you testify, try to attend another committee meeting so that you are familiar with the process and room layout.

### KNOW THE ISSUES

- Know your allies in the room. Before you attend a public committee hearing, know the membership of the committee and find out their possible leanings on the issue you will be discussing. You can find out how legislators have voted on similar issues by going to the Nevada Legislature's website at [www.leg.state.nv.us](http://www.leg.state.nv.us).
- If you are part of a group, plan your speeches so that you do not duplicate each other's ideas. Strive to make one point without duplicating the testimony of other speakers.
- Have knowledge about the "other side of the story." You may be asked questions about the differences.

## WRITING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor are great advocacy tools. After you write letters to your elected official, sending letters to the editor of a newspaper can achieve wider goals. Letters to the editor reach a large audience, are often monitored by elected officials, can bring up information not addressed in a news article, and create an impression of widespread support for or opposition to an issue.

**KEEP IT SHORT AND ON ONE SUBJECT.** Many newspapers have limited space to publish letters and set strict limits on the length. Keeping your letter brief will help ensure that your important points are not cut out by the newspaper. Use the "TIPS FOR WRITING LETTER AND EMAIL" as a guide.

**MAKE IT LEGIBLE.** Your letter doesn't have to be fancy, but you should use a computer, typewriter, or word processor if your handwriting is difficult to read.

**SEND LETTERS TO WEEKLY COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS TOO.** The smaller the newspaper's circulation, the easier it is to get your letter printed.

**INCLUDE YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION.** Many newspapers will only print a letter to the editor after calling the author to verify his or her identity and address. Newspapers will not give out your personal information, and will usually only print your name and city if your letter is published.

**MAKE REFERENCES TO THE NEWSPAPER.** While some newspapers print general commentary, many will only print letters that refer to a specific article. Here are some examples of easy ways to refer to articles in your opening sentence:

- I was disappointed to see that The (Publication's Name) May 18 editorial on (Subject) omitted some of the key facts in the debate.
- I strongly disagree with (author's name) narrow view on women's reproductive rights. ("Name of Op-Ed," date)
- I am deeply saddened to read that Congressman Doe is working to roll back affirmative action. ("Title of Article," date)

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