

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 people and communities. As new laws are created and others repealed and rewritten, it is important to ensure that these changes strengthen rather than compromise our constitutional rights. During each legislative session, and in between, the ACLU of Nevada monitors a wide range of issues. Our education, organizing, and lobbying efforts are aimed at informing lawmakers and the public about the civil rights and civil liberties implications of the bills proposed by our elected officials.

INCLUDED IN THIS GUIDE

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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 first. Practice 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 official.
- No longer are you a spectator but a key player in the democratic process.
- Your voice matters and you have the tools, talents, and capabilities to address your concerns and expectations with your elected officials.



Nevada Legislative Building

CITIZEN LOBBYISTS ARE THE 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: they 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 website**

<http://www.leg.state.nv.us/>

UNDERSTANDING THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

Without a doubt, the most important tactic for monitoring the legislature is understanding how it works. In Nevada, there are 63 legislators in two houses: 42 members of the Assembly, and 21 members of the Senate. The legislature meets for 120 days beginning on the first Monday in February.

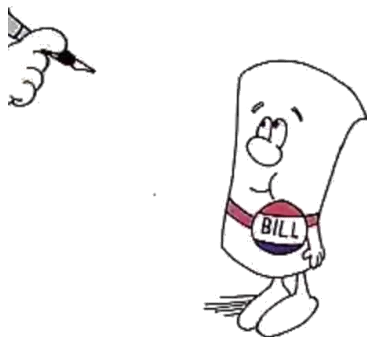
During this time, potential laws known as bills, are introduced in each chamber. The relevant committees hold public hearings, debate the bill language, and make changes to the text of bills based on testimony from citizens, lobbyists, and other members of the legislature.

The bill is then sent to the Assembly or Senate floor to be read, debated and voted on. The bill usually requires a simple majority to pass – 23 votes in the Assembly or 11 votes in the Senate. If it starts in and passes the Assembly, the bill 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 vetoes the bill, the legislature can override his veto with a 2/3 majority vote of both houses.

Committee hearings offer citizens the best opportunity to participate by voicing 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 if none of them are their representatives.

When a bill leaves committee and heads to the Senate or Assembly floor, this is a great opportunity for a citizen to reach out to the elected official that represents them and make their voice heard.

Finally, when a bill reaches the Governor's desk, a citizen can contact him to urge him to sign or veto the bill.



BEING A CITIZEN LOBBYIST

Nevada legislators have offices in the state capitol in Carson City. Some officials are accessible to the community at their home or work and some prefer that their constituents contact them at the state capitol. During the legislative session, state officials spend most of their time at the capitol and are easily accessible by internet 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 they 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. They also 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

CALL YOUR LEGISLATOR

Each legislator lists contact information so that you can call them either at their office, at the state capitol or at home. Legislators pay attention to phone calls and consider support or opposition to bills.

The Phone Call

- Phone calls are most useful when a vote has been scheduled and there isn't time for a letter or visit.
- Phone calls will most likely be received by office staff who will then pass your message on to the legislator.
- Give your name and address to verify that you live in the elected official's district.
- Stick to one subject/topic per call.
- Keep your phone call short and simple:

"I support (bill number/name), because (list 2-3 bullet points), and I urge senator/assemblyman/woman (legislator's name) to vote for this bill."

"I do not support (bill number/name), because (list 2- 3 bullet points), and I urge (senator/assemblyman/woman 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 the staff person/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 (legislators 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 during 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 during 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 LETTERS AND EMAILS



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

- State your name and that you are the elected official's constituent, your position and exactly what you want the legislator to do in your first paragraph.
- 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 your own experiences, elected officials do want to know how a bill or proposal will affect the lives of their constituents.
- Have a clear and concise message. Check the ACLU of Nevada website or call our office. Often we will be able to help you with these.
- If you know the position taken by your legislative representative, include it as 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.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IN COMMITTEE HEARINGS MAKES AN IMPACT

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

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 legislative website:

<http://www.leg.state.nv.us/>

Be Familiar with the Committee Process

- Know the meeting time and location, these can be found on the 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, check the agenda for the committee meeting that you are planning on attending.
- If you can, attend another committee meeting before you testify so that you are familiar with the process and room layout.

Know the Issues

- Before you go to a public hearing, know the membership of the committee and find out how they may be predisposed to the issue you will be discussing, know your allies in the room. You can find out how they have voted on similar issues by going to the legislative home page at <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 other speaker's testimony.
- 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 can achieve other advocacy goals because they: reach a large audience; are often monitored by elected officials; can bring up information not addressed in a news article; create an impression of widespread support for or opposition to an issue.

Keep it short and on one subject. Many newspapers have strict limits on the length of letters and have limited space to publish them. Keeping your letter brief will help assure 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 typewriter, computer, 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.

Be sure to 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 that information, and will usually only print your name and city should your letter be published.

Make references to the newspaper. While some papers 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 Post's May 18 editorial "School Vouchers Are Right On" 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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