



AMERICAN LEGION  
**AUXILIARY**

*Empowering Women, Inspiring Communities*

Indianapolis, IN

[www.legion-aux.org](http://www.legion-aux.org)



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**Advocacy Guide**

Publication of the ALA National Legislative Committee

[www.legion-aux.org](http://www.legion-aux.org)

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## Building Relationships

Are you acquainted with your elected officials? Do you know who they are and the views they stand for? Many of us never meet or contact the people we elect to government and public office. As in any relationship, establishing open lines of communication takes time and persistence. We need to meet new people over and over before we become familiar and comfortable with them. The same is true of our elected officials. Therefore, it is important to work at building a relationship. The legislative influence of the ALA is based on relationships between the Auxiliary member and her legislator.

The best method of becoming acquainted with your senator or representative is through frequent contact. Elected officials want and need to know the opinions of their constituents, since the constituency elected them and will choose to either re-elect or not re-elect them based on their performance in office. Building a relationship with a legislator does not need to take place through a face-to-face meeting. Writing letters, sending emails and faxes, and making phone calls are the easiest means of contacting officials. These actions make each of us an advocate.

Following are some icebreakers for making contact with legislators:

- 1) Send thank-you notes to compliment legislators on a job well done or on their committee appointments.
- 2) Invite your state senator or representative to address The American Legion Family.
- 3) Share with legislators when the ALA, TAL and SAL host a noteworthy event or when members have achieved an outstanding accomplishment.
- 4) Let your legislator know when he/she has cast a vote you disagree with and politely ask for the reasons behind their vote.
- 5) As legislative issues arise, contact your legislator to share your opinion and point of view.
- 6) Ask legislators how they will be voting on an issue and ask for their response in writing.

## Important Legislative Issues

### Budget and Funding Issues

- ▶ **Department of Veterans Affairs funding**—support for mandatory funding for a large part of the VA budget so that the VA can function without having to go through the budget process each year.
- ▶ **Department of Defense funding**—support for adequate funding for our military's daily salaries, housing, the equipment they need to complete their mission, etc.
- ▶ **State Veterans' Homes**—support for adequate funding for our veterans in the state veterans' homes.
- ▶ **Department of Housing and Urban Development and Department of Labor**—support for adequate funding for initiatives related to affordable housing and job training and placement and Transition Assist Programs (TAP).

### Veterans' Healthcare Issues

- ▶ **Wounded Warrior Act**—support for the returning wounded soldiers.
- ▶ **Long delays in processing VA claims**—support for legislation aimed at reducing the backlog within the VA system.
- ▶ **Having to prove that health issues are combat related**—the burden of proof should be placed more on the military record system.
- ▶ **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury**—The effects of PTSD and TBI can cause serious problems for our returning military. Funding for studies and care are vital.

### Women Veterans' Issues

- ▶ **PTSD and Military Sexual Trauma (MST)** are among the priority issues for women in the military.
- ▶ **Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act**—The VA System has historically been a male-oriented system. It is time to look carefully at health issues faced basically by the women in the military, now 17 percent of the total personnel.

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### **Other Veterans' Issues and Benefits**

- ▶ **Educational benefits**—support for expanded Montgomery GI Bill educational benefits for exiting military.
- ▶ **POW/MIA**—continued support for the location and identification of the remains from past wars.
- ▶ **Concurrent receipt**—support for disabled veterans whose disability pay is deducted from their military pensions.
- ▶ **Homeless veterans**—support for programs that assist homeless veterans and veterans who are at risk of becoming homeless.

### **Issues Affecting the Quality of Military Family Life**

- ▶ **TAP/Transitioning Program**—support for funding and program redesign to help soldiers readjust to civilian life.
- ▶ **Electronic healthcare records**—support for transition to electronic records to help military families as they move so often.
- ▶ **Basic Allowance for Housing**—With the cost of housing increasing, the DoD system must keep pace with adequate housing for all military.
- ▶ **Family Support Network**—With so many deployed soldiers, the Family Support Network has become a vital part of the military family.

### **Patriotic Issues**

- ▶ Support for the Flag Protection Amendment.
- ▶ Support for preserving recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance at events and at schools.
- ▶ “Get Out the Vote” initiatives.
- ▶ Immigration issues.

### **Children & Youth Issues**

- ▶ Issues affecting the children of our nation, state or local community in regard to the health, safety or well-being of our youth.

Visiting your legislators and their staff in their district offices or in the Washington, D.C., offices requires planning:

- 1) **Make an appointment.** Contact the scheduler in your legislator’s office to make an appointment. Requests must be given in writing. The legislator may be too busy to visit with you in person. Legislative assistants, however, are very knowledgeable and often specialize in a particular legislative area such as Veteran Affairs. The legislator depends on assistants to research information, weigh the evidence and make recommendations. At the time you schedule the appointment, you will need to identify the topic(s) you would like to discuss. For contact information go to any one of these sites:  
**<http://capwiz.com/legion/dbq/officials/>**  
**[www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov), [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)**
- 2) **Be on time and be flexible.** Legislators and staff assistants have tightly scheduled days. If you are tardy for the appointment, there may not be enough time to see the legislator or assistant. Also recognize that if a floor vote is called, the legislator is off. You may be asked to wait, reschedule or have a walking meeting.
- 3) **Be brief but on-point.** Time is limited, so making your point will be appreciated. Plan ahead. Write down the issue you would like to address, state whether you are for or against the bill and list two or three important points you would like to make about the bill. Use supporting facts; rely less on emotion. Make your points relevant by “bringing the issues home.”
- 4) **Ask your legislator for his/her stand on the issue.** Get a commitment. Let the legislator know what action you would like from him/her. Are you asking for a vote for or against the issue? Would you like him/her to speak for or against the bill on the floor? Does the legislator have a contact with a committee member that you would like him/her to utilize?
- 5) **Be polite.** Using good manners leaves the door open for future productive visits.

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- 6) **Be gracious.** Thank your legislator for taking time out of his/her busy schedule to meet with you. This also is a great time to verify the commitment you feel your legislator made regarding the issue you discussed.
- 7) **Report the outcome.** Let your unit, district, department and/or national chairman know how the meeting went and what the outcome might be.
- 8) **Present a business card upon arrival; get a business card from those you meet with**—this contact information will prove invaluable for future meetings, correspondence.
- 9) **Say “thank you.”** Always follow up with the person you met. Email is best, but fax works; handwritten notes will take 3-6 weeks to reach its destination—your response to those you met with should be immediate.

Building rapport with a Congressional staff member is essential for carrying out your agenda. If a legislator is unavailable to you, don't hesitate to meet with a member of his or her staff. Legislators rely on staff members to handle many constituent contacts. This is especially true on the national level.

After you meet with a staff member, he or she is likely to summarize your meeting in a memorandum to the legislator. If you present your legislator with a complex problem, he or she will probably ask for a staff recommendation before taking any action.

Each representative's office is organized differently; however, most Congressional offices include the following staff positions:

**Chief of Staff**—This staff member is usually based in Washington, D.C. Typically this position directs the staff, follows both local and national issues—especially those with political implications—evaluates the political outcome of legislative proposals and constituent requests and oversees office operations, including the assignment of work and the supervision of key staff. Your contact with this person may be limited.

**Director of the District or State Office**—This staff member is closest to the grassroots and is particularly sensitive to constituent concerns. Though principally concerned with local matters, the district or state director can be an excellent liaison for conveying your views on national issues to the legislator. Getting to know the district or state director can be important to establishing a relationship with your representative.

**Appointments Secretary**—This member of the staff is the keeper of the legislator's calendar. Get to know the appointments secretary if you want to get to know your legislator. This individual is responsible for making travel arrangements and coordinating speaking dates as well as visits to the district, etc.

**Legislative Assistants**—These staffers are issue specialists. Almost all Congressional offices will have an LA dedicated to Veterans' Affairs. Get to know this person.

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**Committee or Subcommittee Staff**—If a legislator has substantial seniority on a committee or subcommittee, his or her work on issues within the panel’s jurisdiction may be handled by committee or subcommittee staff. They are experts on the issues they cover. These staffers will be responsive to constituents of the legislator, even though they are employed by the committees and subcommittees.

**Case and Project Workers**—These staffers are responsible for responding to nonlegislative constituent concerns, including any specific problems constituents have with government agencies. These workers may be in Washington, district or state offices. Case or project staff usually work closely with the district or state director.

In this section you will find information to make things go smoothly when communicating with your legislator by letter, fax or phone.

### Letter Writing

Before September 11, 2001, written correspondence with a member of Congress was easy and effective. Today letter writing is still an effective means of communication but it is no longer the preferred method of communication or the most timely. Letters sent to a congressional office in Washington, D.C. through the US Postal Service must go through a decontamination process delaying its arrival by 4-6 weeks. When it does arrive, it is brittle and not easy to open and read.

- ▶ It is recommended that it be typed rather than handwritten. If you are writing to your Senator or Representative consider sending that letter to the nearest local office. It will arrive within a day or two of sending and it is guaranteed the staff in the local office know what to do with it once received.

Effective letter writing should include the name and number of the bill and should observe the following principles:

- ▶ **Clearly identify yourself**—Make sure you identify yourself as a constituent or otherwise concerned citizen. Be sure to include your name and address on the letter itself as the envelope could get lost.
- ▶ **Keep it short**—Try to keep your letter to one page or less and focused on one subject. Be factual enough to support your position. Don’t be emotional or philosophical. Explain to your legislator why he/she should be concerned; after all, your point of view may be one that the legislator has not been concerned with.
- ▶ **Get to the point**—Summarize your position or request in the first paragraph using the rest of the letter for explanation and supporting information.
- ▶ **Be factual**—Don’t dilute your credibility with arguments that cannot be substantiated. Use justification contained in recent legislative alerts, Spirit of America legislative e-newsletter, The Dispatch articles or The American Legion magazine. Two or three facts are sufficient.

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- ▶ **Personalize your message**—Explain how the proposal in question will affect you, your family, your community or your organization.
- ▶ **Be cordial**—Respect your legislator’s right to have a different opinion. Offer to provide further rationale in support of changing his/her position. Your goal is to build a relationship and keep the lines of communication open. The elected official who does not agree with us on this issue could be our strongest ally on the next one.
- ▶ **Be specific**—Ask for specific action either to support or oppose a specific bill, amendment or other action. If possible, refer to the legislation by name and number, stating who introduced it, and summarizing its intent.
- ▶ **Thank your legislator**—Be sincere in your expression of thanks for his/her time and attention. Example:  
“Thanking you in advance for your attention to this matter.”
- ▶ **Ask for a response to your letter**—If you would like a reply, request it in the letter and include your street address, and a deadline date. If you do not hear by that date, follow up with a phone call.

When writing to a senator or representative other than your own, you will not likely get a reply unless you make it clear why they should reply. For example, if you represent an organization or company which has members or does business in their district, that might help.

### Telephone Calls

Telephone calls are good when time is short—just before an important vote—and may influence a legislator’s decision whether to support or oppose an issue.

Call toll-free to the Capitol Switchboard: 1-877-851-6437, 1-800-828-0498 or 1-800-614-2803. Ask for the office you would like to speak to. You also can request that one office transfer you to the next. Most staff members are happy to do so.

Before you call, put your facts together, know the name, number and sponsor of the bill in question. What specific section(s) of the bill concern you? How does the legislation affect you, your community or your organization? What

alternatives can you suggest to make the legislation better? What action do you want your legislator to take?

When you make the call, be courteous, brief and to the point. Identify yourself as a constituent by giving your name, address and phone number. It is not necessary for you to speak directly to your legislator. Leave your message with the person answering the phone or with the staff person working on the issue. Present your facts and position on the issue. Tell the person what action you would like your legislator to take. Be polite. To ensure that your message is transmitted to your legislator, request a response in writing. Thank the person for listening to your request. Be prepared to answer his/her questions. Be sure to get the name of the person you spoke with.

Follow up. Find out how your legislator voted on the issue. If your legislator supported your views, be sure to thank him/her. If the vote was not what you wanted, note your disappointment but indicate your desire to continue working with your legislator. Never be rude, impolite or threatening.

### Fax

The above guidelines should be used if you choose to send a fax. Legislators usually have a fax number available for public use. Fax your letters instead of mailing them because Congressional mail security screening can delay postal letters by 1-3 weeks, particularly during security alerts.

### Email

Many members automatically delete email from outside their district or may reject messages copied to other members. More are using the “WriteRep” system where you must have a zip code from the district of the Congressman whom you want to correspond with. Tip: Go to the Congressman’s Website and get the zip code of one of their district offices, or get a zip code for any city in that district.

**For a complete list of email addresses and fax numbers for Congress, the Senate, governors and state legislators, visit [www.conservativeusa.org/mega-cong.htm](http://www.conservativeusa.org/mega-cong.htm).**

**Requesting Opinion of Legislator**

Date  
 Senders Name  
 Address  
 Address

The Honorable <Full name of legislator>  
 Local Office Address or Washington Office Address  
 Address

Dear Senator or Representative <Last Name>,

What is your position on penalties for juvenile offenders convicted of “adult” crimes such as murder?

As a mother of two elementary school-aged children, I have been particularly troubled by the increase of pre-adolescents committing horrendous, even premeditated crimes, often on school grounds. What is particularly troubling is a juvenile penal system that allows a convicted criminal under the age of 18 to go free when he or she reaches that age.

I understand that a bill proposing dramatic changes in the juvenile penal code could reach the Senate floor later this term. What is your position on this issue so vital to our children’s safety now and in the future? What is the full version of this bill, and how do you plan to vote?

I look forward to hearing from you on your position regarding this issue. In case you need to speak to me, my telephone numbers are (315) 834-xxxx (day) or (585) 394-xxxx (evening). Thank you for your service to our community.

Sincerely,

Your Name

**Asking for Legislator’s Vote/Support**

Date  
 Senders Name  
 Address  
 Address

Senator Chuck Hagel  
 U.S. Senate  
 Washington, DC  
 Fax: 202-224-5213

Dear Senator Hagel,

As the representative of the 900,000 members of the Auxiliary and a long-time resident of the state of Nebraska, I thank you for your continued support and sponsorship for the passage of the Flag Amendment and for your time.

As you know, SJR 12 is scheduled for a vote the week of June 26. I look forward to seeing you cast your vote; each positive vote will bring us one step closer to passage. I hope you can join us for the press conference sponsored by Senator Frist scheduled for June 14, Flag Day. This press conference is tentatively scheduled for 9:15 in the Mansfield Room of the Capitol Building.

I will be on Capitol Hill June 14-15 and am at your disposal if you would care to meet on this important issue or any other related to our Veterans and their families.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Carol Van Kirk  
 National President

Cc: Lincoln District Office

## Legislative Websites

### <http://www.legion-aux.org>

American Legion Auxiliary Website. Subscribe to ALA eNews, *Spirit of America* legislative e-newsletter and *HomeFront* magazine.

### <http://www.legion.org>

The American Legion Website. Subscribe to The Dispatch newsletter.

### <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

Link to Library of Congress. Search for bills and resolutions by bill or by sponsor. View Congressional Record, committee reports, schedules and calendars.

### <http://www.c-span.org/resources/capitalnews.asp>

Link to newspapers in your state to read about state issues and legislation.

### <http://www.c-span.org>

Get updates on Congressional activities, voting schedules and the Congressional calendar.

### <http://www.capitalnews.org/>

Provides latest updates and links to the top stories of the day.

### <http://www.va.gov/>

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Read documentation of testimony given before Congressional committees, legislation pertaining to veterans. Access House and Senate VA committees. Locate your senator or representative.

### <http://veterans.house.gov/>

House committee on Veterans Affairs. Access subcommittees, legislation, schedule, hearings, contact information.

### <http://veterans.senate.gov/>

Senate committee on Veterans Affairs. Access legislation, issues, hearings, contact information.

### <http://capwiz.com/legion/home/>

Get a synopsis of legislative issues regarding veterans and the military, access The American Legion position on legislation and locate bill sponsors and cosponsors. Find your elected officials: governor, senators, representatives. Locate governmental agencies. Check on election races in your area.

### <http://www.senate.gov/>

View a biographical and historical directory of senators, representatives, vice presidents. Lists committees in the Senate. Access Veterans Affairs committee with information on legislation, issues, committee hearings and contact links.

### <http://www.house.gov/>

View directory of representatives, House committees and schedule and a link to the Veterans Affairs committee.

### [www.capitoladvantage.com](http://www.capitoladvantage.com)

**877-827-3321**

Site profiles all Congressional members, contact information, standing committees and state Congressional district maps.

### [www.leadershipdirectories.com](http://www.leadershipdirectories.com)

**212-627-4140**

Guide to federal agencies and governmental offices.

### [www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html)

Congressional Record

### [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov)

Federal Election Commission

### [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

White House

### [www.defenselink.mil/](http://www.defenselink.mil/)

Department of Defense

### [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)

State Department

### [www.supremecourtus.gov](http://www.supremecourtus.gov)

Supreme Court

### [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

U.S. Census Bureau

### [www.rnc.org](http://www.rnc.org)

**202-479-7000**

Republican National Committee

### [www.democrats.org](http://www.democrats.org)

**202-863-8000**

Democratic National Committee

### **Capitol Switchboard**

**202-224-3121**