

# Advocacy Manual for the Virginia General Assembly Session.

A Brief Guide on How You can Influence State Lawmaking.

## Introduction

Your voice matters. Our elected leaders may possess the best intentions, but they don't necessarily understand what it is like to be affected by the same set of circumstances as you. As an experienced political consultant, public advocate, and lobbyist, I've witnessed the power of advocacy by "ordinary" people, even when the odds are against them. My experience has taught me that if we don't believe in the power of our own voices, then neither will our politicians.

This guide was created for that reason-- to equip concerned individuals with knowledge to impact Virginia's political future between elections. Progress is not achieved by waiting for the right candidate to run, nor is it attained when one party wins more power over the other. A brighter future is forged by people who realize that we can be our own champions. This is no easy task, but it is my hope that the information found here can help.

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## What is the Virginia General Assembly?

The Virginia General Assembly (GA) is the lawmaking part of our state government. In Virginia, we call the lawmakers who represent us "General Assembly Members." **In short, our General Assembly is like Congress, but only for Virginia.**

Since the General Assembly is "Virginia's Congress", it is made up of two chambers. The lower chamber is **The House of Delegates and has 100 members**. The upper chamber is the state **Senate and has 40 members**. Every GA member can introduce bills (potential laws), and each member serves on **committees** (more on committees later).

## How Long Is the Virginia General Assembly?

The General Assembly (GA) only passes new laws during a "Session." Every GA Session begins on the second Wednesday of January, and typically lasts for **60 days during even years and 45 days during odd years**. GA Members may vote to extend the length of a Session, or the Governor can force GA members to meet by calling "Special Session." **The key takeaway here-- Session is very short, so early planning and frequent actions are important.**

## How are Virginia's Laws Made? How Can I be Involved?

**To pass a new law, a GA member must gain a majority of votes from both chambers of the General Assembly and approval from the Governor.** Every new law goes through the same basic process:

### 1. A Delegate or Senator has an idea for a law.

The idea often comes from a lobbyist, advocacy organization, policy think tank, or a **constituent** (*a person who is eligible to vote for a representative on election day*). The GA member must present their idea to the **Division of Legislative Services (DLS)**. The GA member who introduces the bill becomes the **Chief Patron**.

**Advocacy Tip: Create your own bill!** A “**bill-by-request**” is legislation that the chief patron introduces on behalf of a group or constituent. All you must do is ask a GA member to help. This works best when presented in writing-- a short description and some bullet points will do. You can also ask the Division of Legislative Services to transform your idea into a legal language first (for free!). Contact the DLS at [dls.virginia.gov/contact](https://dls.virginia.gov/contact).

## 2. The bill is sent to a Committee.

The **Speaker of the House of Delegates** and the **Clerk of the Senate** are responsible for assigning bills to committees. The committee will decide if the bill is worthy of a vote by the full chamber. *Think of the Committees as gatekeepers because every bill must go through them first.* The committee chairman decides when a bill is reviewed in a public hearing and voted on by the committee members. *The Chairman also has the power to stop a bill from being considered.* Committees choose the fate of bills during public hearings by voting on a set of actions (explained later). Committees often use their **subcommittees** to review a bill first.

### **A quick note on subcommittees!**

- The purpose of subcommittees is to recommend action by the full committee. In the House of Delegates, subcommittees almost always review a bill. The Senate will only send the most complex bills to their lower counterparts. It’s important to remember that **House subcommittees can kill a bill, but Senate subcommittees only make recommendations.**

After hearing testimony, fielding questions from experts and the patron, and debating the bill, any committee member can “**move**” (fancy way to say “ask”) the committee to vote on an action. Another Committee member must “**second**” (fancy way to say “agreed to”) for the vote to take place. Only after a move *and* a second can a bill be voted on.

### **Committee and Subcommittee Actions**

- **Report:** This moves the bill from the committee stage and will be voted on by the entire chamber.
  - This requires a majority vote. **A tie will kill the bill.**
- **Pass-by-indefinitely (PBI):** The bill is defeated unless a member who voted to kill it moves (asks) the committee to reconsider the vote.
- **Carry Over:** *Only used in even years.* This action forces the bill to be reconsidered the following year.
- **Refer (House) or Re-refer (Senate):** Sends the bill to another committee for review. These may come with a committee recommendation to **Report** or **PBI**.
- “**Table**” or “**Lay-on-the-table**”: Technically, this paves the way for the bill to be reconsidered later. However, this action is almost always used *to kill a bill*.

**Advocacy Tip: Speak at a committee hearing!** Hearings represent the most valuable advocacy opportunity for several reasons. The most important of which is the fact that ANYONE can speak in support or opposition on ANY bill. You don’t need to be a lobbyist, expert, or public official; you just have to show up!

**Your Public Testimony is effective for three reasons:**

1. Reporters are attracted to public comments because they frame issues in a personal and relatable way. Legislators understand how bad they will look in the news if they vote against someone with a personal tie to the issue.
2. Public testimony at committee hearings is rare. Your testimony may be the only time our leaders are exposed to your perspective on an issue.
3. Public comments are not inherently political. If an issue affects you, or someone you know personally, then you are not there as a Democrat or Republican. You're there because it's the right thing to do.

**3. The full chamber takes a vote.**

Now the bill is up for a vote by every member of one chamber. At this point, any member can offer new **amendments** (fancy way to describe bill changes). Bills that receive a majority of votes are then sent to the other chamber, and the committee process starts over. This means that a bill that passes the House of Delegates must also be "reported" by a Senate Committee and receive a majority of votes on Senate floor.

**Advocacy Tip: Use every method of contact to convince your legislator to vote a certain way.**

Every GA member tracks how many people contact them about a given issue or bill. A few emails and calls will force our representatives to take notice.

**4. The Governor signs the bill, vetoes it, or offers changes.**

Virginia's Governor has multiple options when a bill reaches his/her desk. They are:

- Sign the bill to make it law;
- Change parts of the bill and send it back to the General Assembly for approval;
- Veto the bill;
  - The General Assembly can override a veto with a two-thirds vote in BOTH houses
- Do nothing and the bill becomes a law anyway;

**Advocacy Tip: Contact the Governor's [Constituent Service Office](https://www.governor.virginia.gov/constituent-services/).** Public input goes a long way in demonstrating political popularity or distaste, and it's the only way to hold our Governor accountable. Call his office at **(804) 786-2211** or send an email through the office webpage → <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/constituent-services/>.

**5. The bill becomes law!** Laws signed by the Governor go into effect on July 5th of the same year unless otherwise specified.

## How do I stay informed and Track Bills?

Keeping up with current events is a crucial component of advocacy. Social media, news outlets, and political organizations tend to focus on the national conversation which, while important, can distract us from what's occurring locally. Here are some tools to help you stay informed about current event and issues in the Commonwealth.

**VA News.** *The Virginia Public Access Project* sends out a daily email with news articles solely relevant to Virginia. The content covers national, state, and local news and breaks them down by topic. Sign up for your daily update at <https://www.vpap.org/vanews/>.

**The Virginia Legislative Information System (LIS).** LIS is the resource every lobbyist, advocate, and policy staff uses. It holds information about current and past legislation and committee and sub-committee meeting schedules. LIS is also a useful resource to discover how a legislator has previously voted on issues you care about.

**Richmond Sunlight.** While not as detailed as LIS, Richmond Sunlight is a nonpartisan, volunteer-run bill tracker that helps you find legislation by topic. This online tool also allows visitors to post public comments about specific bills. Access Richmond Sunlight at [www.richmondsunlight.com](http://www.richmondsunlight.com).

**Watch live webcasts of Committee Meetings and Floor Sessions.** Everyone with internet access can keep up with General Assembly deliberations in real time. The links are:

House of Delegates→ [http://virginia-house.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view\\_id=3](http://virginia-house.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=3)

Senate→ [http://virginia-senate.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view\\_id=3](http://virginia-senate.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=3)

## How Do I Contact GA Members?

Nothing can replace the impact of a physical presence but contacting our representatives through other platforms can also be effective. Find contact information for every General Assembly members at <https://viriniageneralassembly.gov/>.

### Tactics

**Postcards** have been rising in popularity in recent years. Postcards serve as a type of petition for legislators to act on an issue or take notice to a cause. However, postcards, like petitions, do not require any follow-up measures from those we send them to. So, to be most effective, postcards should include an “ask” for the legislator to take a position on specific legislation or policy. It is even more important to follow up with a call or office visit, reminding the legislator of your expectations.

**Emails and calls to Richmond offices** are effective ways to ensure a representative understands the concerns of those they represent. Every office has a way to monitor the positions of constituents who contact them about an issue. Legislators may “evolve” their stance on an issue if enough constituents demonstrate a concern about a particular topic, policy, or issue.

**Lobbying:** Nothing beats a face-to-face meeting. All legislators and their staff can be found at the Pocahontas building in Richmond (900 E. Main St., Richmond, VA) during Session. You can call ahead to schedule a meeting, or simply stop by when you’re in town. No special permission is needed.

## How Do I Lobby Our Elected Officials?

Lobbying is a vital component of effective advocacy because it forces our legislators to recognize the urgency of issues and understand the tangible impact of their decisions. Contrary to popular belief, anyone can lobby, and that’s a good thing because our leaders are often far removed from the experience of everyday people and marginalized groups.

Lobbying is simple, if you follow these guidelines:

### DO

- **Use your constituent credentials:** If you are meeting with your direct representative,

take care to showcase your knowledge of your local community. This enhances your legitimacy as a constituent and active citizen.

- **Persuade with the Personal:** Lawmakers must understand your struggles if they are to govern appropriately. Remember that you are there to tell your truth. They may disagree with studies, statistics, and even facts, but they can't argue against your real-life experience.
- **Give them a hard ask:** Legislators can be dodgy when asked point blank about their position. It's perfectly appropriate to hold them accountable by asking if they are in favor, oppose, or lean a certain way.
- **Bring a one-pager:** Lobbying is about leaving an impression. Give your representative a one-page document outlining your point so they have something to reference after you leave.

## Don't

- **View A Legislator/Legislative Assistant as a celebrity:** The General Assembly is a part-time job, but our leaders are presented with thousands of bills every Session. Your perspective provides information they are most likely unfamiliar with.
- **Debate:** Not everyone is going to be on your side immediately. We are there to argue why we feel a certain way, not to tell legislators why they are wrong.
- **Pretend to be an expert (even if you are one):** GA members have likely heard from the experts already so avoid too much "spreadsheet talk". They care more about how constituents will be personally impacted by a bill than they do about existing research.
- **Only cite figures and facts:** It's fine to pepper in statistics occasionally, but studies can always be questioned or contradicted by other research. As mentioned previously, your personal experience or experience of a loved one is not up for debate.

## Creating a Story Bank

If we want to amplify our voices, we must first define what story we are trying to convey. Various issues affect different people in a variety of ways. Lack of access to health care can translate into financial ruin for some, or the difference between life and death for others. Regardless of the issue or its effect, the most persuasive arguments stem from a personal story. It may sound corny, but one powerful story can change the political narrative for the better.

**Story banks** are one of the most powerful tools in any advocacy group's arsenal. They are a compilation of personal experiences that can be referenced at rallies, press conferences, meetings, committee hearings and interviews to bring attention to an issue and/or a solution. Every person has a unique story. So figuring out yours will only enhance your cause.

### Guidelines for creating your story:

- **Keep the focus narrow.** Answer how an issue affects *you* or *one person/family* you know in one very real and relatable way. Try not to delve into multiple points to avoid confusing

your audience or distract from the personal impact.

- **Be Concise.** It's rare to receive more than a few minutes when speaking to a reporter, legislator, or committee. Brevity also helps others remember your story which enhances outreach efforts.
- **Connect the solution.** Conveying urgency is a vital persuasion tactic. Make sure to describe why a proposed solution or policy change is necessary to improve your present circumstances.
- **Call for heroes, don't target villains.** Positive messaging always plays better in the eyes of the public, media, and policy-makers. Your story should give decision-makers the opportunity to do the right thing. Calling out those who hold opposite stances can often harm your cause and may deter those who are neutral from crossing over to your side.

## **Crafting your story step by step.**

- **List the issue(s) you want to be addressed:**
- **Write the solution or an idea for a solution to one of these issues (existing solution or hypothetical):**
- **Briefly describe how this issue negatively affects you or someone you know. Remember to keep this at one point of focus (i.e. this issue hurts me financially, socially, physically, etc.):**
- **Provide personal example(s) of how this issue is damaging your livelihood (financially, physically, emotionally, etc.):**
- **{Urgency} In your own words, answer why a solution is necessary right now:**
- **{Call-to-Action} List the way(s) others can help your cause. Depending on your solution, this should be targeted at your peers, friends, neighbors, or your representatives:**

Once you've mapped out your thoughts, string together a narrative in a way that truly represents your voice. Every personal story can be tailored to accomplish a call to action (recruit others, persuade a legislator, build issue awareness, etc.). Compelling stories are the heart of advocacy because they attach a face to every issue.

## **Earning Media Attention**

Changing the hearts of the public and our leaders often starts with capturing the eyes of the media. Press coverage can move the needle on "lost causes," influence the public opinion, and force legislators to act. The more media attention your issue receives, the more our representatives will prioritize your cause. If nothing else, press coverage adds extra legitimacy and awareness to your issue.

### **Principles of Media Outreach**

- Legislators monitor their local newspapers so do not discount their value.

- Focus on the reporters who will sympathize with your perspective or have previously covered your issue.
- Seek out coverage from outlets that report in a targeted legislator's district.
- Most reporters find leads through digital platforms so post your activity online and through social media.
- Ask for in-person meetings.
- Always follow-up.
- Never lie.

## How to Reach Out and Pitch to Reporters

- **Calling > emailing.** Reporters receive dozens of emails a day. Calling them adds a more personal touch, and you can respond to questions instantly.
- **Research previous work and reference it in your pitch.** Opening a pitch by complementing a reporter's work shows them that you reached out for a reason.
- **Show them that you are a potential source, not a person asking for help.** Reporters scramble to find content for stories, especially during Session. It may be intimidating to ask for coverage, but reporters appreciate those who provide options on what to cover.
- **Be ready to send media advisories and press releases immediately.** Send over supporting materials if they seem slightly intrigued.
- **Make the argument to their editors for them.** Reporters must often gain approval to cover something. Your pitch should provide the information they need to get permission.
- **Focus on the uniqueness of your perspective.** Answer how your actions or goals are different than what they've covered before, or how your cause compliments a previous story they've written. Explain how you are providing a new angle to a tired issue, especially if the content is controversial. Lastly, if yours is a group action, always point out that there will be strong visuals (big crowd, large signs, numerous petitions, etc.).
- **Be aware of their deadlines.** Ask if they are on a deadline or have time to talk to avoid being an annoyance.
- **Be swift with follow-ups.** Provide any extra information or requested materials as soon as possible. Reporters rarely commit to covering something, but you can add extra encouragement by sending Facebook event invites, flyers, press releases, etc.

## Concluding Note:

This document is about politics but not intended to be inherently political. The purpose of this guide is to promote active civic engagement for anyone seeking greater involvement in Virginia state politics.

This guide is also a work in progress. I invite any feedback, questions, or suggestions. Feel free to contact me at [Tim@virginia21.org](mailto:Tim@virginia21.org).