Getting in Contact

To find out the name of your state senator or representative, call your city or town hall (phone numbers are in the blue pages of the phone book) or visit the Massachusetts state House web site www.mass.gov.

Governor's Office 1-888-870-7770

How to Get Your Legislator to Listen

A Guide to Taking Charge

To E-mail your Legislator:

House: first name. last name @state.ma.us
Example: (Robert DeLeo) Robert.DeLeo@state.ma.us

Senate: first name. last name @state.ma.us
Example (Therese Murray): Therese.Murray@state.ma.us

(Or visit the website below to get the phone numbers or your senator or representatives e-mail address)

On the Internet

Massachusetts State House home page: www.mass.gov

Here you will find information on the schedule, what's happening to bills, copies of bills, legislator’s phone numbers at home & at the statehouse, hot issues, general information and more.

The Massachusetts Association of Assessing Officers (MAAO) is a statewide network of advocates, grassroots organizations. The group was formed to support and promote advocacy on taxation programs. MAAO’s goal is to encourage information sharing to help maximize energy and resources.
Angry about program changes?
Think no one will listen to you?
Not sure what to say or how to say it?
Feel that you can't make a difference?

Well, you **can** make a difference-- and we'll show you how.

Speaking out about issues is one of the most important things a person can do. Unfortunately, not enough people do it. There are a lot of reasons people don't speak out on issues.

**Why Speak Out?**

**Here are some reasons that people don't try:**

**Myth: It takes too much time**

*FACT:* You control how much or how little time you spend on making a difference (advocacy). If you have time to make a phone call, you have enough time making a difference. There are a lot of other things you can do from writing letters to going to the Statehouse. It's up to you.

**Myth: Advocates need to be experts**

*FACT:* You don't have to be an "expert" and you don't need to be "professional". Don't worry....legislators are not the experts ... you can talk to them. They need and want to hear from "real people" (yes, YOU!) about what's happening to you.

**Myth: No one will listen to me**

*FACT:* People think that their voices won't be heard by elected officials. But your silence speaks for you. Your silence says you agree with what they are doing. Do you really agree? When you say nothing, legislators assume that everything is OK. If you speak out, they know that people are watching ... even if they don't do what you want.

**Myth: Advocates need training**

*FACT:* If you have spoken up for your child at school, served on a committee at church, or helped organize a block party, you have the skills you need to be an advocate.

The most important thing you can do is share your own experiences, knowledge and concerns.

All it takes to get started is you and your friends deciding to speak up and be heard. Getting your legislator's attention is not as difficult as you might think. Try it! You can do something from your home, in your community, or at the Statehouse. You don't have to do all of the ideas we will give you ... even ONE CALL HELPS! It just depends on how involved you want to get.

"You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no results. "--Gandhi

You decide ... it's up to you!
**MAKING A DIFFERENCE-- TOGETHER:**

**Getting Started...**

**Think about your message**

As you start, think about what is it you want and the best way to explain it. Consider how your message will sound to others and the most effective way to win support. Be focused and clear.

**Talk to your friends**

You don't need a huge rally or a thousand people to be heard. Ten calls on a single issue can be enough. How do you get ten people to call? Reach out and talk to your friends. Use your "circle of influence" that is, talk to people you come in contact with every day ... your friends, neighbors, hairdresser, grocer, etc. When you talk to your friends, then your friends will talk to their friends and the circle grows.

**Make new contacts and friends**

Contact, work and stay connected with other groups--even if their focus isn't the same as yours. Working with your association members across the state will give you more of a voice and increase your chance of influencing the legislator. Legislators need to hear from people with different jobs, backgrounds, and concerns. They are used to hearing from the same kinds of people each year and when someone new calls, they notice.

**Stay confident and informed**

The more you know, the more confident you'll feel. You can learn more through talking to other people. There are individuals and groups that can give you information about the issues you are concerned about and changes as they happen.

**Calling Your Legislator**

You'd be surprised. Legislators are very interested in hearing from the voters in their district (also called constituents). You can reach them at the Statehouse or at home. (See beginning of pamphlet for ways to reach your legislator). Part of their job is to respond to you. Often when you call, a legislative assistant will take your call, but your message will get to the legislator. If you want to talk personally to the legislator, just say so.

**Here are some quick and simple tips:**

**• Write out what you want to say.**

Gathering your thoughts on paper first will help you stay on target and get your message across.

**• Introduce yourself**

State your name and where you live. Give your phone number so they can contact you. If you are a registered voter, tell them they want to know. If you are not a registered voter, go register your vote does count. If you are a part of a group that has a position on a bill, tell the legislator. *Let them know you are not alone.*
• **State your concerns and explain your position (how it impacts YOU!)**

Tell them about your personal experience...it works! They need to hear how a bill will hurt or help you in your everyday life. If possible, give them a fact that will help support your story and position. Paint a vivid picture in their mind with your story.

• **Know the bill number that you are concerned with.**

If you are calling about a specific bill that you've heard about, it's helpful to have the bill number. All bills have a number. Legislators have thousands of bills that call for their attention. Giving the bill number will give you a better chance of being heard. If you don't know the number, you can call MAAO Legislative Committee for help or ask your legislator to find out for you.

• **Say exactly what you want the legislator to do.**

They need to know specifically that you want them to:

- Propose a bill to change something you don't like
- Support a bill you think is a good idea
- Not support (oppose) a bill you think is a bad idea
- Change a bill so that it's better (specify what you want changed)

• **Listen carefully**

Listen and take notes on what a legislator or assistant says. Feel free to ask questions if you don't understand the words they use or what they're saying. If you don't know an answer to a question, tell them you will find out and get back to them. Then be sure you do.

• **Stay focused on the subject.**

If you write down your thoughts before you call, you'll be able to check off the points you want to make. Don't be afraid to steer the legislator back to the subject you are concerned with. Sometimes legislators will try to put you off with statements such as

"It's very complicated" "we don't have the money"

Think about your responses before you call. For example, I understand it's complicated, but we need long-term solutions; or there's money for a lot of other purposes ... it's a matter of priorities.

• **Follow Up on your call**

Send a thank you note to your legislator.

Stay in touch—with more information, follow-up calls, and meetings.

**Gets a commitment** from them stating what they will do?
Meeting with Your Legislator

Getting ready for the meeting:
Legislators want to talk to "real people" ... they are not the experts ... you are the expert...only you can tell them how things are for you. Here are a few suggestions to get you ready.

Choose a place for the meeting that will make you feel comfortable such as a community agency or library.
Try to schedule the meeting when the legislature is not in session so you can get your legislator's full attention. During the legislative session, their schedules are very busy. Call their office to see if they are in session.
Prepare for the meeting by writing out what you want to say (limit it to one or two issues). Separate the myths from the facts.
Invite people who are on your side to go with you. Make the group as varied as possible with people from different backgrounds.
Know your legislator's background (committee assignments, district, voting record). If you need help, call MAAO Legislative Committee.

At the meeting:
Be in control--don't be frightened. Politely, but firmly, explain what you want. Don't get sidetracked.
Be specific about what you want the legislator to do.
Get your legislator to say specifically what he/she will do.
Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know", but that you will get the information and call back with it.
Make it clear you will follow up & monitor the legislator's actions.

After the meeting:
Send a thank you note to your legislator.
Stay in touch--with information, follow-up calls, and more meetings.

Let them know you are watching.
Whether you call or meet with legislators, tell them that you will be watching to see what happens and how they vote on issues. Write short notes or call and let them know when you approve or disapprove of their actions. Keep your legislator accountable!

Get the Word Out … Create Your Event

Come up with your own creative ways to….
Get a legislator's attention
Focus attention on an issue

To focus attention on your issue, take advantage of a special occasion or event that is already scheduled. For instance, a visit by a Representative or Senator to your city or town, in district office hours, etc.
You can schedule events inside or outside the Statehouse... or in your neighborhood. It doesn't always take a huge crowd or a lot of money... BUT it takes some planning.
Past events have included:
Getting people together to send valentines to legislators with a message about your concerns

\[\text{Don't be limited to what's been done in the past ... do your own thing!}\]

Note: There are rules about what you can do at the Statehouse.

Get the Word Out...Use the Media

Getting something printed in the paper isn't as hard as you might think. Letters to the editor are very widely read and can generate a lot of interest. The media usually wants to talk to "real people" who will be directly affected by the issue in the story.

You may also want to contact reporters from your local paper, radio or TV stations who cover related issues. These reporters especially like human interest stories ... the stories that touch people's heart. Call the newspaper to get the name of a reporter who has written a story on what you're concerned about. Then, call that reporter ... they like to do follow up stories.

Weekly papers often want stories that cover local people or issues. Just write something and drop it off.

Here are some guidelines for writing a letter to the editor:

Identify yourself with your name, address, and phone number . State the issue you are writing about . Keep the letter short and to the point

Dear Editor, (Sample Letter to the Editor)

My name is Ana Williams, and I am a resident of New Britain. I am concerned about the co-payments people on Medicaid must pay.

As a 75-year-old widow on Medicaid and social security, I often find that I must choose between going without my heart medication and paying my electricity bill or other bills. I have many friends at the senior center that are in this same situation. We are very concerned.

I am asking the people of Connecticut to contact their legislators to change this during the upcoming legislative session.

Sincerely,

Ana Williams
114 Main Street
New Britain, CT 06053
Daytime phone: 1-617-222-1234
So you're going to the Statehouse

You can influence what happens at the Statehouse!

This section will give you ideas on how to testify at public hearings & describe what goes on during the Legislative Session.

The Statehouse

You can park in various garages in the area, but they often fill up early during the legislative session. Like any big building, it can seem pretty confusing the first time you walk in (especially during the legislative session), but there are people there who will help you.

How to find out what's happening:

On the second floor, the Statehouse Tour desk will be able to help you. Pick up pamphlets describing the way the Legislature is supposed to work while you are there.

Look the for postings which show the day's schedule of all of the public meetings and hearings. If you don't see them, just ask someone. Capitol police officers are around to help too!

Get written information about meetings (a daily bulletin), copies of bills and other information in the "Legislative Document Room". This is in Room 428 on the fourth floor. You can also check out the web site www.mass.gov/legis as all bills are also posted there

If you can, visit the Statehouse and check it out before you testify. But don't worry; most people will be very helpful. Just ask.

Public Hearings at the Capitol

Public hearings can be an important part of advocacy efforts. They are supposed to give people a chance to learn about the bill and to say whether they are for or against the bill. Testifying at public hearings is an EXTREMELY important part of advocacy. Hearings CANNOT be ignored, even though they are usually very frustrating.

You can call your legislator to find out if a bill has been scheduled for a public hearing.

Important facts about public hearings.

All committee hearings MUST give not less than 48 hours notice prior to the time of such hearings. Sundays and holidays are excluded. The Sergeant-at-Arms is notified of all hearings and shall cause them to be published. You can also check out the web site www.mass.gov/legis as all hearings are also posted there. Don't wait until the last minute to line up witnesses, get information on the hearing. Legislators can sometimes help you get more notice about the hearing date.

Often forming hours before the hearing is scheduled to begin. Be prepared to get to the Capitol very early to sign up to testify at the hearing.

Ranging from 1 to 100, and they may or may not be on related topics. Despite time limits (usually 5 minutes), many witnesses speak at length because legislators ask questions.
Frequently two or three hearings on the same issue (different bill number) are held before different committees ... making it difficult to monitor and influence the process. For example, proposals relating to managed health care might be heard by the Human Services, Public Health, Insurance and the Appropriations Committee. The Appropriations Committee frequently reviews bills since costs are usually involved.

Keep a close eye on the bouncing bill. Stay in touch with groups that can keep you informed and up to date.

**How to testify at a public hearing**

**Be prepared to wait and listen.**

Once you are signed up to testify, there is often a long wait before your name is called. The first hour of the hearing is reserved for testimony from legislators, representatives from state agencies, and municipal officials and then the public is heard. Use the time you are waiting to listen to what others are saying. Then you can respond or comment on their remarks when it's your turn to speak. Try not to repeat an issue that you have heard over and over again. When you testify, you could say that you agree with the previous testimony.

**Bring copies if you can.**

Since many legislators can't stay for the whole hearing, it's a good idea to bring copies of your testimony. You may need up to 40 copies. However, don't let it stop you if you can't bring copies!

**Talk to committee members as they come and go.**

Sometimes legislators are willing to talk with you about bills when they are outside the committee room. You can simply approach them politely and ask if they have a minute to speak with you.

**When you testify...**

Remember that you only have 5 minutes to testify
Identify yourself and who you are representing
Identify the bill by name and number
State if you are for or against the bill
Explain your recommendation
Summarize your position
Thank the committee for the opportunity to speak

**Remember to practice your testimony**

**Let your legislators know you've been to the Statehouse.**

If possible, stay at the Statehouse long enough to find and talk to your representative or senator. It's helpful to call in advance and let them know you're coming. If you can't see them in person, be sure to leave a note telling them why you were there along with a copy of the bill of interest to you.

**Lobby Days**

Many groups schedule a day to go to the Statehouse and talk to legislators about their concerns. They will find legislators in their offices; send them notes asking if they can leave the meeting they are in to talk with a constituent. If meetings of the full House or Senate are being held ("session days"), there are people who will take notes in to legislators to have them come out to talk to you. Most legislators respond to these requests, but you must understand that some may not be able to talk with you at that time. Lobby Days can get a lot of attention, but they can get a little crazy. You need to plan ahead and make sure you have help from people who have been to the Statehouse before.

Be sure you have a simple, clear message and a brief fact sheet to give the legislator.
Understanding Your State Government

In this section find out...
Who are the decision makers?
When are decisions made?
How are public policies made?
What happens after a bill is proposed?
What is the budget?
Some Common Questions about your State Government

Who are the decision makers?

The General Assembly
(State Legislature) This group is made up of two separate groups--the House of Representatives (160 members) and the Senate (40 members) with each member serving a two-year term. These two chambers have the authority to spend public funds and to tax the public.

The Governor
The main responsibility of the Governor is to recommend to the legislature how public funds should be spent and how money should be raised. Once this plan (the state budget and the tax plan) is approved, the Governor must make sure that the government --state agencies--spends the money as stated in the budget.

The Committees
There are 27 different joint committees that include members of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Committees are broken down by subject matter. They look at each bill and decide if it should have a public hearing and vote to decide whether another committee or the full Legislature should look at it. Each committee has a House and Senate co-chair who has a lot of power to decide what happens in the committee. Examples of committees include the Human Services Committee, the Education Committee, the Commerce Committee and the Judiciary Committee.

More on Committees....

Ways and Means Committee-Why it's important
The Ways and Means Committee is very important because it decides how much and where the money is spent. Subcommittees within this are responsible for specific areas of the budget which limits their ability to see the big picture and to shift funds.

Another reason the Ways and Means Committee is important is because of its legislative authority. Many people think that when a committee kills a bill, that's the end of it. However, this is not necessarily so since the Ways and Means Committee can propose any program changes it likes even without a public hearing.

Bills in the Third Reading
It shall be the duty of the committee on Bills in the Third Reading to consider all bills and resolves prior to their final reading, and examine, correct and recommend such amendments as may be necessary concerning duplication, grammatical errors, constitutionality, etc. The committee shall also consider all amendments subsequent to third reading and all amendments from the House. The committee shall also act in relation to all resolutions and proposals, and act on any other matters referred thereto.

When are the decisions made?
Before the legislative session, a lot of individuals and groups talk with legislators about the things they would like done during the legislative session. Many times legislators have decided what they want to do long before the session starts.
What happens after a bill is proposed?

If a legislator is for a bill, he/she will try to get it passed. If opposed to the bill, he/she will use tactics to slow it down or kill it. There are times that you want a bill to go forward and other times when you want it killed let your legislator know what you want.

Legislative Session

In **Formal Session** you may act upon reports of committees, messages from the governor, petitions, orders, enactments, matters in the Orders of the Day, and various other matters which **may be controversial in nature** and during which roll call votes may be taken.

In **Informal Session** you may only consider reports of committees, bills for enactment or resolves for final passage, bills containing emergency preambles and the matters in the Orders of the Day. Motions to reconsider moved at such informal session shall be placed in the Orders of the Day for the succeeding day, and no new business shall be entertained, except by unanimous consent.

Going to “The Floor”

Bills that have finished being reviewed by committees go to the "floor" of the House and Senate for review by all of the members of the General Assembly. Bills assigned with "House numbers" (i.e. H96) go to the House first, while Senate bills (i.e. S5) go to the Senate first.

The bills are listed in a daily calendar and they must "sit" on the calendar for three days before they're voted on. Usually they sit much longer than that while key House and Senate leaders review the bills ready for action. When the House and Senate meet each day, they will have a "go list" of bills they plan to discuss that day. Other bills just stay on the calendar. The House and Senate can still send bills back to committees--or just ignore them-- even though they are on the calendar.

Amendments.

To get a bill sent to the Governor for signature, the House and Senate must pass (vote yes) on the same identical bill. If one of them votes to change (amend) the bill, the other must agree. If they can't agree, a small group of people from the House and Senate (conference committee) meets to see if they can work out an agreement. If they can, then that agreement must be approved by the House and Senate.

How are public policies made?

Legislators propose the policy or bill, but you and your friends must give them the ideas for what is needed and actively work with them to get it passed.

Between Session "Interim" Activities

These are usually working groups, task forces and study committees meeting between the formal sessions. It's good to stay in touch year round to know what's happening.
Veto

The Governor must approve every law passed by the House and Senate. Usually the Governor signs the bills (but there is a way a bill can become law without the Governor's signature). If the Governor doesn't like a bill, it is vetoed. If it is vetoed, the bill cannot become law unless the House and Senate each pass the bill with a vote of 2/3 of its members (overriding the veto). This doesn't happen very often.

Often people take it for granted that the Governor will sign the bill. That can be a big mistake. Opponents will lobby the Governor for a veto. Sometimes bills that passed the House and Senate by wide margins still get vetoed.

The Budget

One of the most critical factors involved in the legislative process is money. Nearly every legislative proposal costs someone money to carry out—whether it's to develop regulations, enforce, evaluate, or implement. That means everyone needs to understand the way the budget works.

The Governor develops a budget plan. The Legislature rarely changes the total amount of money (the "bottom line") in the Governor's budget. However, the Legislature often changes the way money is spent and which programs get money. The Governor has the power to veto the Legislature's proposal, if necessary, to get his way.

Two sides to the budget - Taxes & Spending

When we think of government spending and the Ways and Means Committee (which decides how money is spent) usually comes to mind.

Very little attention is paid to the "spending" that the state does through tax breaks, (also known as tax expenditures). As a result of tax breaks, the state collects less revenue and has less money to allocate for other important programs or projects.

Unfortunately, the Legislature does not make sure that the spending in the tax package matches state spending priorities. In fact, tax breaks are rarely examined after they become law except if there are proposals to amend or repeal them. Legislators won't examine these expenditures unless people like you demand that they do.

Taxes & budget are the focus of a constant "spin control" battle to Control what people think is happening.

The Governor and other key players control the way their spending priorities are packaged and sold to the public. You need to look beyond what they are saying. For example, there are often arguments about whether a budget item (such as home care services) has been "cut"—when the funds for a program did not increase enough to cover the increase in inflation. Technically, the program did not have a funding cut; however, because of rising costs fewer people will be served. So it feels like a spending cut to consumers who see a longer waiting list for getting home care.

Beware...legislators may use cutting taxes to look good to the public; when in fact these “cuts” are actually shifting money from one program to another. Some of these shifts hurt the public.