

LEGISLATIVE HANDBOOK

A Guide to Being a Successful Veteran Advocate



VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

NO ONE DOES MORE FOR VETERANS.

www.vfw.org

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

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BEING AN ADVOCATE

No One Does More For Veterans. The Veterans of Foreign Wars Department of Florida and Auxiliary are dedicated individuals working on behalf of veterans, active military and their families. Being an advocate is a lifelong job; a process that takes patience and determination. Advocacy is about recognizing what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter”. In recognizing our individual gifts and talents, we have the capability of changing our world. As advocates, we can create change and call for a more inclusive environment for not just veterans but everyone.

Of course, advocacy goes beyond just recognizing the need to speak up. It goes beyond just thinking to include action – standing up for something. Writing letters and sending emails to legislators is a very powerful and effective way of getting across ideas and concerns you may have as an advocate. It is important that we recognize the power of the pen (or keyboard) and personal conversations and develop connections with our representatives. As a government for the people, we must assert our right to be active advocates!

Legislators have major influence over services and supports to veterans, through funding and policy decisions. The job of legislators is to respond to the need of their constituents – that means you! It is important that legislators know that someone is paying attention to the issues of the veterans and their families – otherwise they are likely to ignore the issue or only listen to the other side. Therefore, it’s important that strong voices for veterans be heard. This Legislative Handbook will serve as a tool to help you become a better and more confident advocate. Remember, change starts with you!

DEALING WITH LEGISLATORS

It is important to recognize that legislators, particularly those in the United States Congress, are extremely busy. There is often an impression that legislators don't care – however that is not typically the case.

Legislators do care, but it is our job to help them care. The reality is that many people make demands on legislator's time, looking for help on a wide variety of issues. It can be very challenging for legislators to balance all the demands they have on them. It is also often difficult for our representatives to understand and be experts on every issue that comes before them. Representatives are subject matter experts on only a few issues, and they rely mostly on their staff and constituents to keep them informed on the wide array of topics they must deal with. Given the time demands on our legislators, and the wide variety of issues that come before them, it is therefore critical to be simple, clear, direct, and as brief as possible when communicating with them. It is also important to recognize that legislative staff are critical allies in efforts to influence legislators. Staff can assist in getting access to a legislator, and legislators often rely on staff to provide guidance on issues. Finally, and most importantly, it should be recognized that in most cases legislators will only pay attention to an issue if they are hearing about it from their constituents. Therefore, it is critical that legislators at the federal, state and local levels hear from us, and in sufficient numbers, so that they pay attention to issues impacting our veterans and their families.

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER

You probably have written many letters before, whether to friends or family or long-distance pen pals; however, writing to a legislative member is a bit different. There are important things to keep in mind while drafting your letter such as length, format, etc. The more well written your letter is, the more likely your message will be powerful and lasting. Here are some suggestions to think about as you write your letter.

TYPE THE LETTER

When possible, type your letter instead of handwriting it. If you don't have access to a computer and printer, then be sure to write legibly. Be sure to use business style formatting. Always print two copies of the letter – one for your records and one to send to your legislator.

IDENTIFY WHO YOU ARE

Let your Legislator know you are a constituent from their District. Be sure to include your name and address and telephone number on the letter itself, as the envelope could get lost.

ADDRESS LETTER APPROPRIATELY

Always address your letter to “The Honorable” (fill in name). Depending on who you are writing, you will use a different salutation to begin your letter.

For the United States Congress:

- House of Representatives use “Dear Representative” (Last name of Member).
- Senate use “Dear Senator” (Last name of Member).

For the State Legislature, follow the same rules.

KEEP IT SHORT

No one likes to read a letter that is so long it loses focus and gets confusing. Try to keep your letter to one page or less and focus on one subject. In the first paragraph summarize your purpose or request, who you are and what you would like to see happen. The middle of the letter should list the specific issues or concerns. It's useful sometimes to list out or bullet a couple of points you want to make in your letter – not only does it help your legislator follow the letter, but it helps keep you on track. Short descriptions of just a couple words in bold type at the beginning of a bullet point or paragraph can also help in making your ideas stand out. The more direct you can be in your letter the better. The closing paragraph should once again state what you would like to see happen.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Explain how a proposal will affect you, your family, community or organization. While stating facts is helpful, the facts come alive when they are attached to a story about yourself or someone you know and is likely to make your letter more memorable. There is great power in the ability to share one's experience with others.

BE COURTEOUS

No one likes to get a letter full of only complaints with no suggestions for improvements or change. If you have an idea you want to share, say it in a non-accusatory way and invite your legislator to consider an alternate viewpoint or take a different course of action. Part of building a relationship with your legislator is to include in your letter a statement of appreciation for their time and consideration of the matter at hand. A long list of threats or complaints will certainly not help your legislator adopt a position. As an added note, a follow up letter of thanks after legislation was passed is always appreciated by legislators and their staff.

DON'T PACK THE ENVELOPE

Sometimes there are studies or press releases we know of that relate to the issues talked about in your letter, however, do not include them in your envelope. The more paper you have packed in the envelope, the more likely it is that your letter will be pushed aside or discarded. Instead, offer to send additional information if they would like it. Remember, it's about keeping it simple. **TELL THE TRUTH**

State only the facts. Do not try to guess at certain things you are not sure about. If you stretch the truth in your letter, it loses credibility. To be taken seriously, always tell the truth and stick to reliable information.

BE TIMELY It's important that when you have an idea or suggestion for your legislator about an issue, tell them right away. The longer you wait to act and use your skills as an advocate, the less likely it is your letter will be effective. Be aware of current legislation and what is going on in your district and state.

ASK FOR RESPONSE

If you would like a reply, request it in the letter and include your street address. If you do not hear from your legislator, follow up with a phone call.



SENDING AN E-MAIL

Today we have the ease and convenience of using the internet at our fingertips. Most legislators publicize an email address for receiving constituent communications. Some use form-filled systems which require you to enter your information and subject matter into an online form. Visit your legislator's website to find their preference for receiving email communication. If you choose to send an e-mail, there are some things to keep in mind like writing a letter.

- Be sure to put your name and contact information in the e-mail
- Share personal experiences the same as you would in a regular letter
- Think about what your message is, be brief and keep it simple -
- Do not send an e-mail everyday – eventually you will be “spam”
- Send the e-mail only to one legislator – cc'ing many legislators diminishes the power of your email. If you wish to contact multiple legislators on an issue, send them each a separate e-mail
- Do not send attachments – you can offer to send additional information separately
- Be kind – do not be argumentative or overly critical in your email

Remember to proof read your e-mail – make sure it's free of spelling and grammatical errors and makes organizational sense.



PHONE CALLS

Sometimes when we don't have a lot of time, it is easiest to make a phone call to your legislator. Again, as with letter writing and e-mail, there are things to keep in mind

- Introduce yourself as a constituent by giving your name, address and phone number. If it turns out they are not available, feel free to speak with one of their staff members. They can answer many of your questions and addressing concerns you may have.
- Think about what you want to say – sometimes having a written list of talking points is helpful in remembering the most important things.
- Put your fact together, know the name, number and sponsor to the bill in question. What specific section(s) of the bill concerns you. How does the legislation affect you, our veteran community?
- Do not ramble in your conversation – keep it short, simple and to the point. State your reason for calling and what actions you would like to see the legislator take
- Don't forget to ask your legislator their view on the bill. If the legislator supports your views, be sure to thank him or her. If they do not share your views, note your disappointment but say you want to continuing working together and if you feel talking further would be beneficial, make an appointment to meet with them in their office.

Remember, phone calls are a great way to make a personal connection, share your views and request action by your legislator. Never be rude, impolite or threatening.

FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

A visit to legislators and staff requires planning. It is very important that your meeting be effective. In order to have the best discussion possible, you must be prepared and ready to answer questions that your legislator and his or her staff may have. Here are some things to keep in mind.

- Know your stuff! The more you know what you're talking about, the more prepared and less nervous you will feel. Look at your legislators past vote on particular issues and know what the opposition is saying about the particular issue at hand.
- Express your views in a respectful manner.
- Be cognizant of the fact that you have a limited amount of time to meet. Legislators are busy so your meeting should not be more than 30 minutes
- Be sure to develop a strong relationship with the legislative staff as they are often times the main point of contact for the legislator.
- Be specific about what you would like the legislator to support – don't just ask for general support.
- Be prepared to answer questions. If you are unsure, don't make up something. Instead, tell your legislator that you will get back to him or her with more information.
- Leave behind information fact sheets that summarize the points you are making in your conversation with the legislator for future review.
- Exchange business cards: This contact information will prove invaluable for future meetings and correspondence.
- Follow up: Always follow up immediately with the person with whom you met to say thank you. Email is best. Handwritten notes will be respected but can take three weeks or more to arrive.
- When meeting, be sure not to speak in an argumentative manner. While you may or may not approve of certain aspects of your legislator's political party, do not make the meeting about "party politics". Remember why you are meeting – it's about the issue (s) at hand – not which party is better than the other

HOW TO ATTEND A TOWN HALL MEETING

What is a town hall meeting?

Most Members of Congress hold “town hall” meetings a several times each year to meet with constituents and give updates from Washington, D.C. They are usually held in a public setting and are free to attend. Town halls provide fantastic opportunities to gain face-to-face access to your U.S. Senators or Representative while they are back in the district. Town hall meetings typically consist of two parts: your Member will speak for about 15-30 minutes about activities in Washington. Then, your Member will open the floor to questions from constituents. This is your opportunity to ask your Member about a particular immigration issue or piece of legislation.

Find out the dates & locations

To find out when town hall meetings in your Congressional district will be held, monitor your Member’s Congressional website, **sign up for your Member’s email alerts**, or periodically call for event updates. Members usually hold town hall meetings in different areas around their district. While it’s best to attend the one closest to your home, don’t hesitate to also attend meetings in other parts of your district.

Before you ask a question:

- Make sure to have your question prepared in advance. Limit yourself to ONE question and try not to let the questions posed before yours influence what you say.
- Raise your hand immediately when the Congressman asks for questions. The longer you wait, the more competition you will have for the microphone.

What should you ask?

- **Avoid yes or no questions or questions requiring a commitment.** If the media is present, Members will be more likely to resist making spontaneous commitments.
- If you ask questions about specific legislation, be prepared to quickly explain what the legislation does. Thousands of bills are introduced each Congress and Members of Congress don’t have them all memorized.
- Ask a question based on an action. A good way to phrase a question is to base it on an action. (“What will you do legislatively to solve X?” or “What have you done to hold President Trump accountable for Y?”) Doing so makes it harder for the Member of Congress to give an answer using only talking points.
- Do your homework! Don’t hesitate to do some extra research on your Member of Congress before the town hall. **If you feel they voted incorrectly on a bill or issued a statement in which you disagree, those are great points to bring up when you are given the microphone.** (“Could you tell me why you voted against the X bill last week, which would have done Y?”)

Be polite!

Your question will be best received if it is phrased respectfully and tactfully. Rude or off-color language will ensure a more guarded response from the Member of Congress and could even turn the audience against you.

Don't leave early.

- **Stick around after the meeting.** If you aren't given the chance to ask your question during the meeting, or you have additional questions, **hang around afterwards.** Most Members of Congress stick around for a few extra minutes to take additional questions one-on-one.
- **Find a staff member.** If your Member does not stick around after the town hall, or you have trouble accessing him/her, locate the Congressional staff and speak to them instead. They can take your comments, answer questions, and refer you to appropriate staff members.
- **Bring business cards.** Bring a business card to give to the staff member to help him or her follow up with your question.
- **Network with other attendees.** If anyone else in the audience asks questions about immigration that are in line with your views, talk to them after the meeting is over. That's a great opportunity to get them involved in activism.

TOWN HALL MEETINGS



COMMUNICATE WITH LEGISLATIVE STAFF

Building rapport with the legislative staff is necessary. The legislators rely heavily on their staff – for policy research, to help constituents and to keep the legislative process running. Also, legislators delegate staff members to represent them at public functions, so be sure to welcome the staff member warmly to events. Legislators with staff support assign a variety of duties to their staff. Most congressional offices include the following staff positions:

- Chief of Staff directs the staff, follows local, state and national news – especially those with political implications, evaluates the implications of legislative proposals and constituent requests and oversees office operations.
- Scheduler keeps the legislator’s appointment calendar. This person is responsible for making travel arrangements and coordinating speaking dates, as well as constituent visits.
- Legislative Assistants are issue specialists. Almost all congressional offices will have an Assistant covering Veterans Affairs. Get to know this person!
- Committee or Subcommittee Staff. If legislator has substantial seniority on a committee or subcommittee, his or her work on the panel might be handled by committee or subcommittee staff. They are experts on the issues they cover.
- Director of the District or State Office: This staff member is closer to constituents and is particularly sensitive to their concerns. Though mainly concerned with local matters, they can be an excellent channel for conveying your views to a legislator.

RESOURCES

www.vfw.org/advocacy

Sign up for VFW Action Corp and find our 2018 Priority Goals and Programs

U.S. Capitol Switchboard

202-224-3121 or toll-free at 877-762-8762

www.govtrack.us

Use GovTrack to research and track legislation in the United States Congress, including Members of Congress, bills and resolutions, voting records and committee activity.

www.congress.gov

The official website for U.S. legislative information. Provides access to complete legislative information for Members of Congress, legislative agencies and the public. It is usually updated the morning after a session adjourns.

www.whitehouse.gov

Latest news from the White House and live events.

www.supremecourtus.gov

The transcripts of oral arguments are posted on the same day an argument is heard by the Court. Same-day transcripts.

www.c-span.org

Get updates on congressional activities, voting schedules and the congressional calendar

SAMPLE COMMUNICATION WITH LEGISLATORS

Sample Letter

Sender's Name

Address

City, State ZIP

Date

Senator (FirstName Last Name)

United States Senate

Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (Last Name),

I am writing you today as your constituent (in the state of Florida or in the xxx District of the State of Florida) and an advocate for veterans regarding proposed cuts to Individual Unemployability (IU) made by President Trump. I urge you to publicly oppose any measure that would claw back tens of thousands of dollars annually from veterans who are unable to work because of their service connected disabilities.

While there are many things in the budget proposal from the President that would add needed services at the VA, veterans must not be required to trade one benefit for another. Balancing budgets on the backs of veterans is not what veterans deserve after honorable service to our country and being disabled as a result of such service. I support the VFW and their opposition to the proposed cut to IU benefits. I call on you to do the same.

The simple fact is that the proposal, which would force veterans to surrender IU benefits when they reach retirement age, would financially devastate our most severely disabled veterans. The IU program pays veterans at the 100 percent rate of VA disability compensation because of service connected conditions making them unemployable even if they are rated at a lower percentage for such conditions. This means that veterans would revert to the lower rating despite their continued inability to work because of their service connected disabilities and would lose other VA benefits, such as VA dental care for themselves as well as medical coverage for their family. Affected veterans would not only lose a significant portion of their VA disability compensation benefits, they would also receive lower Social Security retirement payments because they have not worked for many years due to their service connected disabilities. This proposal could also impact certain state and county benefits, such as property tax exemptions, further impacting their financial well-being.

As your constituent, I urge you to oppose this proposal. Thank you on behalf of all U.S. Veterans.

Respectfully,

Signature

VFW Department of Florida and Auxiliary

SAMPLE MEETING REQUEST

Coversheet format to fax or email meeting requests.

TO: Attention: Scheduler
The Honorable [FirstName] [LastName]'

Email Address: XXX-XXX-XXXX

SENT BY:

[Your name and email address]
[Unit or department position (if you are serving in one)]
[Unit [##], VFW and Auxiliary] SENDER'S PH:

000-000-0000 [work]
000-000 [cell or home]

RE: Meeting Request for [Week/Day], [Month ##, 201#]

DATE: [Month ##, 201#]

Please accept this [fax/email] as a meeting request with the [representative/senator] for about 20 minutes on [Week/Day], [Month ##, 201#], for me and [name(s) of others joining you]. Our schedule is flexible and open between [XX] and [XX]. Would the [representative/ senator] have some time available?

We are constituents of the great state of [state]. I am active in Post [##] in [city, state] and am currently [VFW Auxiliary position]. [Name(s) of others joining you] is/are active in POST [##] in [city, state] and is/are [VFW and Auxiliary position].

The VFW and Auxiliary is the world's largest service organization with nearly 800,000 members in some 9,000 communities. Our mission is to serve veterans, the military and their families.

Your assistance in coordinating a meeting time for us is appreciated. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you.

SAMPLE SCRIPT FOR CALLS

Here is a sample script you can use when you are calling your representative's office. Of course change it as you need to in order to fit what you are calling about. If you are calling to express thanks, then instead of asking for support, tell the staff member you would like to express your appreciation that _____ took a particular action.

You probably will not get to speak with the legislator personally, but you might be able to speak with one of his or her staff members. However, often constituents will be directed to talk with a secretary or intern in the office. But don't worry....your call is noted and very much appreciated.

CALLER: Hi my name is _____ I am a constituent of (Representative/Senator) _____. I am calling to ask for his/her support of a very important piece of legislation on _____ (name the issue the legislation is about). I ask that (Representative/Senator) _____ support the bill (name of the bill).

STAFF MEMBER: He/she may ask you some questions about why the legislator should support the bill.

CALLER: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. If you have any questions I can be reached at (____) – (____). Thank you!

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Remember that the legislative process is both slow and fast at the very same time. Sometimes action is needed right away to show support for a bill while a vote may not actually happen until many months later. This can be frustrating at times when it seems like nothing is moving forward. It is always good to remember that even if you feel like your letters, phone calls or emails are not making a big impact, they are! It is difficult sometimes to see what is going on behind the scenes in the policymaking world. There are often times many conversations that occur between representatives and their staff and other interest groups that you might not always be aware of, but remember that everyone has an important part to play in the legislative process.

Also, there are several parts to the legislative process at both the federal and state levels, and each state may have slightly different processes for passing legislation. It can at times be a very complicated process that involves a lot of back and forth debate between members.

Remember, regardless your method of communication with a legislator, it is important to report your communication and results to the Legislative Chair. Report information including the name of the legislator and office held, the topics covered, the legislator's response or commitments and whether any follow-up by the Legislative Committee is warranted.

Remember, **EVERY BENEFIT A VETERAN RECEIVES STARTS WITH LEGISLATION**

Contacts

Florida Senate

[Flsenate.gov>senators](http://flsenate.gov/senators)

House of Representatives

Myfloridahouse.gov