



THE AMERICAN LEGION FAMILY



LEGISLATIVE HANDBOOK

My senators

Office building

Room number

Phone number

Office building

Room number

Phone number

My representative

Office building

Room number

Phone number

I live in the **Congressional District**

INTRODUCTION

Organization is the key to success in any undertaking. This is especially true of The American Legion's legislative program.

This booklet explains the importance of legislation to the Legion's programs, why it is necessary for members of The American Legion family to lend individual support when requested, and how to know when to offer support.

Do not fall for the line that you, as just one person, can't make a difference in changing old laws and making new ones, or that the legislative process is too complicated.

Although a large American Legion membership is important, there is far more to legislative organization than numbers. Leadership, teamwork and a clear understanding of how and when to make a concerted effort to get legislation passed are necessary to get the job done.

A BRIEF LEGISLATIVE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN LEGION

In 1918, when World War I ended, there was no national veterans hospital system. Compensation authorized for disabled veterans, widows and orphans was inadequate and delayed. Federal administration of veterans programs was in the hands of too many agencies and neglected. All these factors contributed to widespread suffering in the veterans community.

That was the situation The American Legion faced in the winter and spring of 1919. Returning veterans' physical and financial challenges were considered a national disgrace; to correct them was a national responsibility.

These were problems that required the hand of Congress. The American Legion immediately established a National Legislative Committee, which scored its first success in September 1919 when Congress granted the Legion a permanent federal charter. Over the course of the next few weeks and months, the Legislative Committee championed various laws improving veterans disability and death benefits.

From the beginning, the Legion's National Legislative Committee (now the National Legislative Commission) has been on the front line every time Congress has been petitioned to enact laws expanding and strengthening benefits for veterans and their families. The American Legion Auxiliary has

been a strong and effective partner since its organization in 1921. Sons of The American Legion also has contributed to many legislative achievements.

These victories have never been easy. The Legion has had to stand strong and push back against efforts to erode or destroy veterans programs. Other times, we've lost battles – for example, in 1933, the Economy Act nearly eliminated all veterans and dependents benefits. The Legion refused to accept defeat, and the next year, it led a unified campaign that succeeded in restoring most of the disabled veterans benefits taken by the Economy Act.

Since then, the Legion has logged one legislative win after another, starting with the GI Bill – hailed as one of the greatest pieces of social legislation of the 20th century – and securing pensions for surviving spouses and children of war veterans.

In December 2013, Congress reduced military retirees' cost of living adjustments (COLA) by 1 percent for working-age retirees, which would cost the average E-7 more than \$70,000. The American Legion made a legislative blitz and was able to get the provision repealed in just 55 days.

In short, the Legion's leadership has contributed to a stronger America. From children and youth programs to Americanism, national security and foreign relations, we've enhanced and strengthened our nation's life through the legislation we've supported.

WHO DECIDES LEGISLATIVE POLICY?

The American Legion's legislative policy is determined by elected delegates to national conventions and duly elected members of the National Executive Committee. No other person or group is authorized to formulate or determine national legislative policy. There are established rules of procedure concerning development and approval of such policy.

Briefly, this is how a national legislative policy is developed. A resolution outlining the need for legislation is presented to the national convention. If approved by a majority of delegates, it becomes a legislative mandate of the National Legislative Commission.

During its meetings between national conventions, the National Executive Committee also approves resolutions that become legislative directives.

HOW DO LEGISLATIVE MANDATES START?

A national legislative resolution may originate in any post where one or more members believe that a law should be enacted, or that an existing law should be amended or repealed. If the resolution is approved by the post, it is referred to the department executive committee or to the next department convention. If adopted, the resolution is forwarded to The American Legion National Headquarters for referral to

the next national convention or the next meeting of the National Executive Committee.

Legislative resolutions can also originate during national convention standing committee meetings, department conventions or department executive committee meetings. But approval by one of the Legion's national governing bodies is required before a resolution can become legislative policy.

ROLES OF THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION

After a legislative policy is determined by resolution, it is referred to the National Legislative Commission for appropriate congressional action.

The commission is made up of qualified Legionnaires appointed by the National Executive Committee upon nomination by the national commander. Members receive no compensation except for expenses incurred while attending meetings. Salaried personnel include a director, deputy directors, an assistant director, a grassroots coordinator, and a small support staff in Washington. The staff in the Washington office is called the National Legislative Division.

The commission has the exclusive responsibility of representing The American Legion before Congress. No other individual or component of our organization is authorized to initiate, support or oppose legislation before

Congress in the Legion's name. This singular approach ensures coordination of legislative efforts and prevents conflicting messages to Congress by the American Legion family.

This does not mean that individual members, posts, units or squadrons are in any way restricted in helping the commission. Far from it.

One of the commission's key jobs is to rally as much support as possible from the American Legion family at times when numbers are needed. In other words, the commission is the national organization's legislative spearhead to mobilize its membership.

Again, the commission does not determine policy. Planning, strategy, coordination and dissemination of information are its principal roles.

The commission's administrative functions are performed by the staff in Washington and include:

- Arranging the introduction of bills
- Preparation and presentation of testimony before Congress
- Liaison with members of Congress, their staffs and committees
- Prepares and delivers letters of support for specific bills
- Maintenance of records

The commission also remains alert for legislative proposals detrimental to the interests of the American Legion family and all veterans.

The main job of the commission and its staff is to determine ways and means by which the Legion's legislative objectives can be successfully accomplished.

OUR WORK WITH CONGRESS

A legislative mandate means little until it is directed into congressional channels. This is done by converting the resolution into a bill and enlisting the support of one or more influential member(s) of Congress to introduce the measure for the Legion. We try to select members who will be steadfast in their support of our proposals, because introduction of a bill is relatively simple compared to the obstacles that follow.

Following introduction in the Senate or House of Representatives, a bill is referred to the committee having jurisdiction. Once hearings are scheduled, we present testimony and ask for full chamber debate and vote in either the Senate or House.

When one chamber passes a bill, it is then referred to the other chamber and much the same procedure is followed. When both chambers act favorably on a measure, it must then be approved by the president before it becomes law. The president may indicate approval by signing the bill or indicate disapproval by veto. However, a bill will still become law if two thirds of both chambers vote to override a presidential veto.

The Legion is active throughout the entire legislative process. Our staff present testimony before congressional committees and subcommittees nearly 50 times each year. We work with select senators and representatives to get favorable reports on bills we support and sometimes communicate with all members to gain full chamber approval.

WHEN HELP IS NEEDED

There are many obstacles to enactment of the Legion's legislative program. Veterans legislation usually requires federal spending, and some members of Congress may object to a bill because of the costs involved.

Sometimes there is opposition to the Legion's proposals from outside of Congress – opposition that works hard to defeat or curtail our objectives. Such opposition is almost always on a dollar-and-cents basis and can be influential. On occasion, some powerful and well-financed groups have sought to dismantle the Department of Veterans Affairs and transfer its functions to other agencies, or do away with hospital privileges for sick, disabled and needy veterans who suffer from non-service-connected illnesses but cannot afford medical treatment elsewhere.

Consequently, as powerful and respected as the American Legion family is, there are times when it is not enough to pass resolutions at national conventions or send representatives to plead our case before Congress.

At such times, the National Legislative Commission needs the help of the entire American Legion family to overcome the opposition.

WHAT KIND OF HELP IS NEEDED?

The most effective way to support The American Legion's legislative agenda is communication – by individuals in posts, units and squadrons expressing their views on specific bills. Emails, telephone calls, Legislative Alerts, fax messages and personal letters from constituents have a powerful influence on members of Congress. They want to hear from you so they can gauge public opinion on specific issues.

HOW WILL YOU KNOW WHEN TO HELP?

The National Legislative Commission often requests that members of the American Legion family make personal or written contact with their senators and representatives.

These requests come in the form of Action Alerts, which describe the issue to be addressed and include a pre-formatted optional letter that you can edit to personalize your message. Simply add your name and address and click “send,” and you will receive an email confirming that your message has been delivered to your elected officials. Also included in the Action Alert are phone numbers and mailing addresses of your

elected officials so that you can call their offices or send them written letters if you wish.

Requests may also appear in the Legion's publications – *The American Legion Magazine*, the *Dispatch*, *The American Legion Online Update* and at **www.legion.org** – and the response by individual members should be prompt.

Timing is crucial. Contact members of your congressional delegation as soon as a bill is scheduled for consideration.

CAN ONE PERSON MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Absolutely! Because most Americans are reluctant to write to members of Congress, the average representative and senator treats each letter received as the opinion of 150 to 200 people. Thus, your one personal letter carries significant weight.

WHAT DO I SAY?

The National Legislative Commission provides key message points concerning bills under consideration. Simply put these key message points in your own words. Localize them, if possible, by relating how the issue affects veterans and their families in your community.

HOW TO IDENTIFY BILLS

Every bill or resolution introduced in Congress has its own number. These numbers are assigned at the time of, and in order of, their introduction. Senate bills are identified by the letter S followed by the bill number (S. 123, S.J. Res. 12 or S. Con. Res. 1). House bills are identified by the letters H.R. followed by the number (H.R. 123, H.J. Res. 12 or H. Con. Res. 1).

Usually bills with identical language introduced in different chambers will have different numbers – for example, S. 123 in the Senate may be H.R. 321 in the House. Make sure you cite the correct bill number in your discussions or correspondence.

ORGANIZATION AND TEAMWORK

Leadership, organization and teamwork are all essential to the success of The American Legion's legislative program – at the national level, but also at the post, unit and squadron level.

The local element is important when building an organized legislative effort. People, not organization names, are who influence members of Congress. Post, unit and squadron officers should seek to appoint interested and capable legislative chairpersons. Promptly notify department headquarters of their names and contact information.

Devote time at meetings to discussion of legislative issues. This way, members know what is going on and when to lend a hand. When your legislative chairman asks for help, be prepared to give it.

All members of the American Legion family should know the names of their two senators and the representative for their congressional district. Whenever possible, make their acquaintances.

Department legislative chairmen have an incredibly important position. They work with local posts, units and squadrons, as well as National Headquarters and the National Legislative Commission. They request help on specific legislation and assist in building support throughout the department. They also coordinate legislative activities by distributing legislative material and preparing articles for department newsletters, bulletins or websites.

In any major legislative effort, everyone must work as a team, from the Legion's national offices to each individual of the Legion family.

NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

The American Legion's ability to mobilize its membership at the post and department levels was enhanced with the establishment of the National Legislative Council in 1975. The council's purpose is to "propagate an interest in a furtherance of the legislative goals of The American Legion and to serve as a medium for disseminating information and

developing an understanding with our elected representatives.”

The council has 535 members – one representative for each congressional district and senator. The council’s general membership is appointed by the national commander upon the advice and recommendations of department leaders. The national commander appoints the council’s chairman and a national vice chair from each department. The council takes its directions and instructions from the Legislative Commission.

In close partnership between the council and the National Legislative Commission, the Legion’s legislative mandates can clearly and accurately be transmitted to members of Congress.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION CENTER

The American Legion maintains several webpages dedicated to our legislative activities. The Legislative landing page on our national website, **www.legion.org/legislative**, is regularly updated with news and information about Legion legislative activities, our current legislative priorities, recent testimony and more.

There is also a link to our Legislative Action Center, where members can see the most recent Action Alerts and send messages to their elected officials. The Legislative Division also sends out action alerts via email when important legislation is pending. The alerts provide key message points and a

specific request for action. It's free and easy to sign up for the action alert email: <http://capwiz.com/legion/mlm/signup/>

The Legislative Division also sends out a semi-weekly newsletter that provides information on legislative issues and news concerning The American Legion's legislative initiatives. Sign up to receive the Legislative Update at www.legion.org/newsletters.

The Legislative Division has a wealth of useful information on members of Congress, the executive branch, the media and individual pieces of legislation. Contact the division by calling (202) 861-2700 or emailing leg@legion.org.

CONCLUSION

This booklet offers general information that may be used year to year. For that reason, we have avoided reference to any specific legislative program.

The American Legion Magazine, the *Dispatch* and other official publications of the Legion family – at the local, state and national levels – offer information on specific legislative issues.

Members are encouraged to get involved and stay informed on local and national issues of interest to the Legion. Attend your department convention and introduce yourself to members of the department legislative commission. Such participation is vital

and necessary for The American Legion to continue to effectively represent the interests of America's veterans and their families.

One final thought: the U.S. Constitution was crafted with the intent of including every citizen in the legislative process. From electing members of Congress to oversight of their work, every citizen has a stake in our government. Good government is the result of engaged citizens. In the words of President Abraham Lincoln, who praised this "government of the people, by the people and for the people," we, the people, are ultimately responsible for how we are governed.

NOTES



THE AMERICAN LEGION

1608 K St. NW
Washington, DC 20006

 www.legion.org

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