

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc.  
Affiliate Chapter Relations Committee

Affiliate Chapter Handbook  
Third Edition  
Section 21

Utilizing the Political Process:  
It Really Does Work!

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## **Utilizing the Political Process**

“Nothing just happens in politics.  
If something happens you can be sure it was planned that way.”

*Franklin Delano Roosevelt*

Definition – “Politics is the process of making decisions on matters which involve more than one legitimate alternative.” Fred Weintraub, CEC

For most practical purposes, one’s state legislature can do anything it wants, *for you or to you*. As you are reading this, thousands of corporations, associations, public interest groups, state agencies, and lobbyists are planning strategies and tactics to convince state legislators to enact laws or make appropriations that will benefit them, their organizations, or clients.

### **Lobbying**

A traditional view of a lobbyist is someone with fistfuls of cash and a big cigar doling out money to legislators in the back halls of our state and national capitol buildings. While this image works for the movies, it is not today’s reality. Those affiliate chapters of RID which have discovered how to lobby have become successful in their attempts to introduce new legislative initiatives.

Whether one is a professional lobbyist or someone who is simply planning to lobby on an issue to which they are committed, there are certain traits that are essential to functioning successfully in the legislative environment. Without these traits, any other techniques you may have perfected, or expertise you may have developed, will be quite worthless.

### **How to be an Advocate (Lobbyist)**

Be willing to give part of your time to meet elected officials (mayors, city council persons, representatives, senators, or governor) in their offices.

- Be pleasant and non-offensive.
- Convince the official that it is important for him or her to listen to you and your affiliate chapter group (constituency).
- Be well prepared and well informed about the issue.
- Show that you are personally convinced about the issue but that you do understand the various issues of the question. (Example: You want the state to provide free TTYs but the state does not have the money to do that.)
- Be brief, well organized, and to the point.
- Use the “soft sell” approach; be careful not to push too hard. Understand the meaning of the word “COMPROMISE.”
- Develop and leave a short written or typed fact sheet to the issue you are presenting

with the elected official.

- Ask to be informed when something is going to happen to the issue.

### **Making Political Decisions**

In using any communication skill, there is an established pattern that will surface as strategies are planned. It follows this sequence:

- Identify needs
- Prioritize needs
- Determine personnel involvement
- Select sections to be discussed
- Plan activities
- Evaluate outcomes

### **Know the Players**

- Do you know the name of your council member or state representative? Member of Congress? Do you know any of them personally? Or, do you know anybody who does know any of them personally?
- Have you ever contacted any of them for any reason either in person or by letter?
- Have you ever worked to elect any of them?
- Do you know where their offices are?
- Have you ever attended any function at which they participated?
- Have any of them ever addressed the affiliate chapter?
- Have any of them ever done anything to help meet the affiliate chapter's goals?
- Have you ever thanked them when they did something favorable to you?
- Have you ever written to protest something they did or didn't do that you did not like?

### **How Legislators Make Their Decisions**

Legislators make their decisions on the basis of a wide variety of input. An advocacy organization or individual can influence a number of these avenues of input. Some of these avenues are:

- Personal judgment and values of usually no more than six to ten members of legislators and their staff
- Strong views of respected and trusted friends
- Assumptions about the economy and budget
- Public opinion and the popular media; strong views and effort of major interest groups
- Descriptive information about the proposed program
- Legislative hearings
- Legislative Budget Office reports and other independent reports on programs

- Policy research studies and reports
- Administration views and lobby efforts
- Program evaluation studies

### **Kinds of Information Needed**

- **Statistics:** data that convey progress, needs, or status quo. Examples: number of deaf or hard-of-hearing people needing services versus those receiving services; number of personnel needed versus personnel available; dollars needed versus dollars expended.
- **Research:** data that shows information that bears on legislative proposals. Examples: Achievement, occupational adjustment, numbers of deaf and hard-of-hearing people, interpreters.
- **Trends:** data that illustrate the direction in which the field is moving, particularly as reflected in legislation or litigation in other states and the federal government. Examples: how effective the phone relay services are; effectiveness of state commissions; effectiveness of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) versus Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.
- **Human needs:** information about human needs. Examples: case studies, case histories, individual problems and resolutions.
- **Direct effect of legislation:** progress is made in direct response to the passage of Legislation. Example: effectiveness of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) on inclusion of deaf and/or hard of hearing students.

### **Doing Your Homework: Surfing the Halls of the Legislature**

You may have noticed that as RID has become more of an electronically integrated organization our affiliate chapters conduct most of their business over the Internet. For those affiliate chapters that want to increase their involvement with the legislative process, Internet access is vital. The federal government and every state have access to their political process on the Internet. One can search, identify and track specific bills through the Internet. One of the best places to start is in the Virtual Law Library of the University of Indiana. There is access to every state online law library, legislature and other related information. (<http://www.law.indiana.edu/law/states.html>)

### **Getting an Author for a Bill**

One of the most important trips made to the legislator's office will be to ask for her or his authorship. Bills will typically have several authors, although the chief author is the most important. The chief author carries most of the burden for guiding the bill through the legislative process, and potentially, for the bill passing or not passing. Thus, selecting a potential chief author and then convincing this legislator to become chief author are two significant tasks. In considering a chief author, you want a legislator who:

- Is committed to the issue
- Has the time to devote to the bill's passage
- Has influence or power within the legislative process
- Is on a committee where the bill will be heard
- Is a member of the majority caucus

### **Communication with Legislative Representatives**

Communication access to legislators is extremely important to the success of legislative efforts. Without a good plan for communicating your message to the legislature, much time and effort will be wasted. In all communication, it is very important to be respectful and direct. Do not make assumptions that the legislator will take care of the interests of the affiliate chapter; if they are not aware of the issues, they cannot vote as the affiliate chapter would like.

- Avoid using preprinted, copied, or other superficial means of communication. They have little impact and will generally work against the cause.
- If there are concerns about a specific issue or bill, make sure to reference any file numbers. Include brief descriptions of the issue before the legislature. Thousands of bills are introduced and can become easily confused with the affiliate chapter's efforts.
- Discuss one bill or issue at a time. It is best not to overwhelm a legislator with too many issues. This is even more important as the legislative session progresses.

### **Guidelines for Establishing Relationships with Legislators**

One of the most effective means for opening up communication with a legislator is a personal meeting. This will provide an opportunity to see the legislator's reaction to any requests for support you present. A one-to-one meeting will also allow for an immediate response when questions or concerns arise. A personal visit provides you and the legislator an opportunity to get acquainted, and an experience, which - if all goes well - will definitely prove helpful in future contacts. The personal contact provides what cannot be accomplished as well by letter, telephone call, or another means. The best approach is to make an appointment in advance, and make sure to be on time. Other helpful hints include:

1. Call for an appointment. The legislator's district office will know when he/she will be in town.
2. If you do not know who your legislator is, call the board of elections.
3. Try to find out about the legislator's background.
  - To what party does he/she belong?

- To what committees and subcommittees he/she has been assigned?
  - To what is his/her vocation or occupation when he/she is not a legislator?
4. Be prepared for the appointment; have facts and figures ready. The legislator may have questions that require immediate answers. Have information available about the request, such as a fact sheet.
  5. Introduce yourself, RID and the RID affiliate chapter you represent (bring a brochure or other general information if possible).
  6. Remain focused (have a copy of the proposal ready for the legislator) and explain why you support the bill.
  7. Do not misrepresent yourself. Be straightforward and truthful. Maintaining credibility is important.
  8. Do not be abrasive or argumentative. Do not make threats about not voting for or supporting the legislator if he/she does not view things as your affiliate chapter does. You may want to ask for his/her support at a later date.
  9. Plan time for questions.
  10. Ask the legislator whether or not he/she will support the bill.
  11. Thank the legislator for her/his time.
  12. Sending a note thanking the legislator for his/her time and reminding him/her of any follow-up he/she has agreed to do is very helpful; if there is an agreement to send information, do so promptly.

### **Writing a Legislator**

Writing continues to be one of the most effective means of communicating with legislators. Many legislators will readily acknowledge that a good letter - particularly from a constituent - can make a difference. A letter will have maximum impact if it contains the following components:

- A brief statement (ten words or less) on the subject and the bill number if writing on a specific bill
- An introduction of yourself that tells why you are interested in or concerned about an issue or bill
- A personal anecdote about how the bill will affect you, your family, your community, your business, your job, your school, etc.

- Some facts, including supporting information and data, to support your position
- An invitation to contact you to discuss the bill, if desired
- A request for a reply if you need one
- A statement of appreciation for consideration of your position
- Use a computer or typewriter and double-space the lines. Type or print only on one side of the paper. If you do not have a computer or typewriter, write with ink, and write neatly
- Refer to the bill or issue that you are writing
- List the most important facts about the bill or issue that you are writing
- Type or write thoughts as clearly as possible. You can write up to 250 words
- Make sentences short and clear
- Type or write about only one topic in the letter. Do not put all of your eggs in one basket
- If you type or write to criticize, always start with a word of praise, agreement, or appreciation; then, offer some constructive criticism
- Do not use abusive language
- Give facts, as you know them. Be truthful in what you write, and always sign your name to the letter

### **E-Mailing Legislators**

E-mail is a popular communication option for individuals connecting with their legislative representatives. However, exercise caution in how it is used. Many groups have developed bad reputations for flooding their legislatures with inflamed e-mail messages. This has become a tactic used as an attempt to overwhelm and intimidate some legislators - first, because of the sheer volume of messages e-mail can generate, and second, by the tone of angry messages which can be sent nearly anonymously. Many groups are discovering that as legislators have become aware of false messages and other abuses over e-mail, this tactic can backfire. If you use this medium it is best to remember the following:

- Keep messages short
- Speak to the bill or issue
- Provide names and telephone numbers
- Remember to say, "Thank You"

### **Telephone Calls**

Telephone calls made to legislators are a convenient way to get the membership involved in the legislative process. When bringing an issue before the legislature it is important to develop a telephone tree among the members that can be activated to help move a bill through committees and onto the House or Senate floor. When using the telephone, remind the members to:

- Identify themselves and their affiliate chapter

- Speak to the specific bill or issue
- State their support (or opposition)
- Request the legislator’s support (or opposition)
- Leave their telephone number
- Remember to say, “Thank You”

### **Allies and Working Together**

The political process is just that: political. Be prepared and do not begin lobbying efforts without being ready and willing to compromise or negotiate from the original position. The affiliate chapters that have seen the greatest deal of success are those that have developed strong working coalitions of constituents and stakeholder groups. The one thing all politicians hate to see is their constituents bickering and being unwilling or unable to work together. Nothing will defeat a bill faster than infighting between interested parties. There will be plenty of opposition to new ideas, so developing consensus between stakeholders is vital. In addition, do not underestimate the power of the status quo. Just because the affiliate chapter has a great idea for change does not mean legislators will share the notion. One of the most challenging fights involves having to convince legislators that the way things are being done today is not the right or the best way.

### **Presenting a Testimony**

#### 1. Testifying Before a Legislative Committee

Testifying in front of legislative committee or at a public hearing can be very challenging. One’s testimony can often help or hurt a bill’s chances for passage. Making contact with key legislators prior to appearing before the committee will certainly help. Meeting with legislators will help you to identify the friendly faces among the committee. The most important thing you can do is to prepare. Consider the following items in preparation:

- Attend other committee hearings to learn the process
- Ask the authors what key points they believe might help
- Know the protocol used during committee testimony

#### 2. Lay the Groundwork

- Be sure to visit various committees and subcommittees at work. Learn how others present their testimony
- It is important to understand the roles of the various committees before whom you may testify. Also get to know each member of the committee/subcommittee and find out something about his or her legislative districts and personal background. It will help you in anticipating questions

and understand the legislator's frame of reference when a question is asked

- Authorization and appropriations committees have different missions and memberships. Authorizing committees originate the program, tell how it will work, and set the spending levels necessary to carry out the program. Appropriations committees provide the actual dollars to operate the program
- Prepare written testimony ahead of time. Make 15 to 25 copies and distribute to the legislators and their staff members
- Speak for about five or ten minutes. Do not speak from the written testimony
- Do practice the testimony before a mirror and ask friends to think up of possible questions legislators may ask

### 3. Plan to Testify

When testifying, one is trying to influence the legislators to see things their way and, hopefully, vote in favor on the bill or issue.

- If you want to appear before a committee/subcommittee, all you have to do is contact the committee staff. Just say, "I understand hearings will be held on such and such a date, and I would like to appear as a witness"
- Introduce yourself and the RID affiliate chapter
- Keep remarks brief and to the point
- Tell the committee who will be impacted by the bill
- Sometimes due to limited time, you may be asked to submit a written statement for the record
- Copies of written testimony should be sent hours before the scheduled hearing
- Be prepared for many distractions such as phones, visitors, staff members walking around
- It is a good idea to have preliminary meetings with legislators or their staff members. Such meetings help make you feel comfortable, develop confidence and trust, and enable you can find out what kinds of questions to expect from the hearings
- *Remember* the legislators and members of their staff may not know the subject about which you are testifying. You have a big job to share information with them. Remember this: they have the final vote and not you. Be careful not to talk down to them
- Do not ignore any other legislators or staff person not on the particular committee/subcommittee you are testifying to. Remember that people talk to one another and you never know when somebody may be able to help the cause
- Finish by saying thank you and asking for questions
- When asked questions respond only to the question (do not use a question as a springboard for other issues)
- After all questions are answered, again thank the chair and members

#### 4. Preparing Testimony

- Effective testimony begins with well-prepared documents such as brief statements, good tables or graphs, and clear illustrations and examples
- Slides or overhead projectors take up too much time
- Avoid clichés like “if the federal government does not take care of them, no one will” or “The state has an obligation to help the deaf and hard-of-hearing people.” Many, many special interest groups and advocates are lobbying the legislators every hour
- Do not worry about legal language. There are attorneys working for legislators who help draft bills into laws
- Testimony should be short (five to ten minutes in length). Make testimony as positive as possible while being truthful. Talk about what works, not what does not work, and do not waste time discussing the failures of a program. Talk about how to make the program work better
- It is helpful to have real people tell their story. Remember that legislators are accustomed to solving constituents’ problems and responding to real peoples’ needs

#### 5. Present the Testimony

- Be prompt! Be prepared to start immediately when the chairperson asks you
- Be yourself! Be comfortable do not try to impress the legislators with credentials; they see thousands and thousands of people like you
- Look at each legislator and watch for his or her reactions
- After you present the testimony, be prepared to answer their questions. Do not be afraid to say, “I do not know, but...”

#### 6. After the Testimony

- Write a letter of thanks to the legislators for giving you the opportunity to present a testimony. This will help the legislators remember you

## **BE READY TO ANSWER ALL TYPES OF QUESTIONS**

TYPE	THE PURPOSE IS...	EXAMPLES ARE
Factual	To get information	The five “W’s”: who, what, where, when, and why.
	To open discussion	The ‘how’ question
Explanatory	To get reasons and explanations	“In what way would this help solve the problem?”
	To broaden discussion	“Just how would this be done?”
	To develop additional information	
Justifying	To challenge old ideas	“Why do you think so?”
	To develop new ideas	“How do you know?”
	To get reasoning and proof	“What evidence do you have?”
Leading	To introduce a new idea	“Should we consider this possible solution?”
	To advance a suggestion of your own	“Would this be a feasible alternative?”
Hypothetical	To develop new ideas	“Suppose we did it this way, what would happen?”
	To suggest another, perhaps unpopular opinion	“Another region does this, would this be feasible here?”
	To change the course of the discussion	
Alternative	To make decisions between alternatives	“Is ‘A’ our choice in preference to ‘B’?”
	To get agreement	
Coordinating	To get agreement	“Can we conclude that this is the next step?”
	To pave the way for action	“Is there general agreement on this plan?”

## Glossary

### **(Two Dozen Words That Will Help You Understand What Is Going On)**

*Amendment* - A change or addition to a bill or motion; must be germane to the subject of the bill or motion.

*Author* - Legislator who introduces a bill; chief author who has primary responsibility for passage of a bill which may have up to four co-authors. Sometimes called a sponsor.

*Bill* -The form in which a proposal to create, change, or abolish a law is introduced into the Legislature.

*Calendar* - Bills and/or other items of legislative business listed in the order in which they will be presented in the chamber. The body (Senate or House) considers bills.

*Caucus* - Legislators who belong to the same political party and are organized to impact legislative actions. “To caucus” is a meeting of these legislators.

*Chamber* - Place in the capitol in which legislators meet to consider legislation and or conduct other business.

*Committee* - A group of these legislators, appointed by the leadership, that considers and makes recommendations on bills that have been referred to it. Senate and House each have its own committee system. A “standing committee” is a permanent committee unless the rules of the body are changed. Other committees include “conference” (members of Senate and House appointed to reach a compromise if different versions of a bill); “interim” (appointed to study a subject after the session adjourns, and charged with reporting back to the legislature in the next session) and “ad hoc” (appointed for a specific purpose and dissolves when task is completed)

*Committee of the Whole* - Senate or House acting as a single committee. When either body meets as a Committee of the Whole, debate is informal and actions are preliminary. Votes are recorded in the Senate when three (3) members demand a vote; in the House when fifteen (15) members demand a vote.

*First Reading* - The formal introduction of a bill. Clerk of the legislative body “reads in” the bill usually the reading of the bill title is all that is necessary. Following the first reading, the bill is referred to the appropriate committee.

*Floor* - Area in the chambers where legislators sit and from which they speak.

*Gallery* - Area reserved for the public to observe the chamber.

*General Orders* - A list of the bills scheduled for hearing by the Committee of the Whole.

*Hearing* - Committee meeting in which points of a view on a bill are presented and votes are taken.

*Journal* - Official record of the actions taken by the legislature. Each body has its' own journal. A copy of the journal is usually available the day following the proceedings.

*Majority Leader* - Legislator selected by the Majority Caucus to direct caucus strategy on the floor; leads the caucus.

*Motion* - proposals made formally to a committee or to the full Senate or House. Bills and other legislative business are moved through the legislature by motions.

*Quorum* - Established by rule, it is the number of legislators that must be present to conduct business; generally, a majority.

*Rules* - Adopted by the legislature, rules regulate the process and actions for the legislature in a prescribed way.

*Second Reading* - Following committee action, a committee report is profiled to the legislative body and following acceptance of the report, the bill receives its' second reading; next, the bill is placed on General Orders.

*Sine Die* - Final adjournment of the legislature.

*Speaker* - The presiding officer of the House of Representatives, usually of the majority caucus. Often referred to as "the second most powerful position in state government" (following the governor).

*Third Reading* - Reading of the bill before the legislative body votes on final passage.

*Veto* - Return of a bill by the governor to the legislature without the governor's signature (which is necessary for a bill to become a law). To override a veto, two-thirds (2/3) majority of the entire legislature is necessary for passage.

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References:

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (1997). *Navigating the legislative system*. Paper presented at the Leadership Training of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. Washington, DC.