

GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS & ADVOCACY

a toolkit to help you make change happen



Acknowledgements

Senior Editor: Jeff Miller

Contributing Editors: Ellen Buchman, Peter Montgomery

Contributors: Edwin Fichter, Eduardo Garcia, Cedric Lawson, Patrick McNeil, Scott Simpson, Jheanelle Wilkins, Tara Yarlagadda

Layout & Design: Laura Drachsler

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights is a coalition charged by its diverse membership of more than 200 national organizations to promote and protect the rights of all persons in the United States. The Leadership Conference works toward an America as good as its ideals.

The Leadership Conference Education Fund is a 501(c)(3) organization that builds public will for federal policies that promote and protect the civil and human rights of all persons in the United States.

Access this material online at http://www.civilrights.org/action_center/toolkit.

Dear Friend:

This toolkit was created with you in mind. Its purpose is to educate, equip, encourage, and empower you to make change.

Our goal is to provide you with the basic structure and strategies needed to plan and carry out an effective grassroots public education or advocacy campaign. It's possible to write an entire book on each of the areas covered in this toolkit – in fact, many have been written. But you don't have to read half a dozen books to put together a strong campaign.

What you need to do is establish your goals, create a strategy, make a step-by-step plan, and mobilize the people, partners, and resources to make it all achievable. This toolkit is meant to be a concise guide to accomplishing that. And we include plenty of suggested resources if you want more in-depth information.

The Leadership Conference and The Education Fund provide leadership and coordination to coalition efforts and support the work of national and local partners by providing strategic and technical assistance, preparing materials, offering training, and identifying resources to support coalition efforts. Information on training for grassroots advocacy is provided by The Leadership Conference; information relating to education and coalition building is provided by The Education Fund.

We believe in the power of coalitions to bring people together for a common purpose. History shows that change can be made when diverse voices unite around a shared goal. We hope you will consider us your partners in making needed change happen. You can learn more about our work at www.civilrights.org. You can also reach The Leadership Conference field staff at 202-466-3315 or at grassroots@civilrights.org.

Onward!



Ellen Buchman, Vice President, Field Operations
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
The Leadership Conference Education Fund

EDUCATING AND ENGAGING PUBLIC OFFICIALS

State legislators, governors, members of Congress, and state and national executive branch officials have the ability to make and shape policies that have a huge impact on people's lives. Think, for example, of the number of lives that have been saved by public education campaigns to combat drunk driving.

When meeting with public officials as a constituent, keep in mind that your leaders are in office to serve the public. You have a unique story and they won't know what you think unless you tell them.

Understand the Legislative Process

Knowing how the legislative process works, and tracking the progress of legislation you are interested in, will help you organize communication with legislators when it is most needed.

Educating Public Officials

Individual Meetings with Legislators and/or Staff

Most members of Congress and state legislators are happy to schedule meetings with constituents. Call the local office to find out when your elected official will be in town and ask for a meeting. Fridays and Mondays are often good days to find them in-district, as well as during a longer congressional recess. Their calendars can fill up quickly, so don't be surprised if it takes time to get a meeting scheduled.

If you are trying to set up a meeting on behalf of a local coalition or group of leaders, be sure to let the scheduler know how many people you expect to attend. Ideally it should be a relatively small group representing a diversity of constituent groups and interests. You may be able to get a meeting sooner—or with a higher ranking staff member—if you note in your request that a particularly well-regarded member of the community will be attending.

Be Heard!

Some people who work for, serve on the boards of, or volunteer for local nonprofit organizations, are wary of getting involved with advocacy campaigns. Some worry that campaigns to educate elected officials might appear partisan and damage existing relationships. Some fear crossing a legal line that could threaten their institution's tax-exempt status. There are good answers to these concerns. Don't let them prevent you from getting your message heard. If your voice isn't heard when public officials are considering action on issues important to you and your community, you'll miss out on a chance to influence their decisions.

Keep in mind that the congressional schedule is frequently changing, and you may end up meeting with staff rather than the legislator. Don't think of this as a lost opportunity. Staff members may in fact be more familiar with the details of an issue and may have more time to spend hearing your views.

It can be frustrating to deal with staff at very busy legislative offices, and they may seem brusque or impatient with you. Remember that they are often operating under stressful situations. They're likely to remember you favorably if you show patience, respect, and understanding of their situation while making a request or advocating for your position.

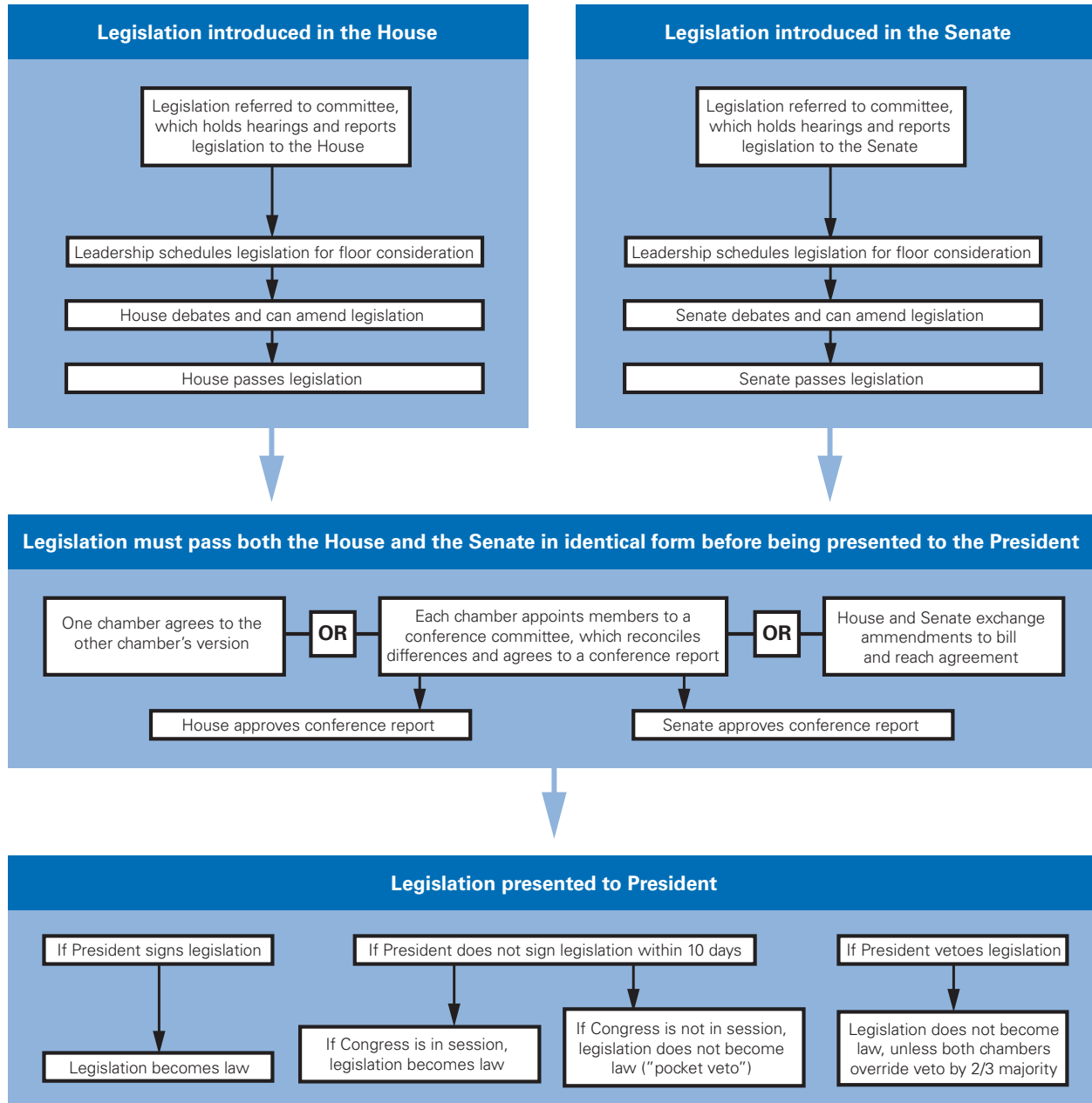
Meeting with Your Elected Officials:

Prepare in Advance:

- Find out if the legislator has recently been in the media, and for what reason(s). That may tell you something about his or her current priorities.

United States Congress Legislative Process Flowchart

Legislation may begin in either the House or Senate. Similar legislation is often introduced in both chambers



- Do enough research to understand the legislator's interests, positions, and voting record on the issue you are advocating for. If you are there to talk about a specific bill, be sure you know its current legislative status. Has it been introduced? Who supports it? Is it likely to be voted on soon?
- Anticipate the kinds of questions or concerns that will be raised and have clear answers ready. It's especially important to anticipate what your opponents would say to the same legislator or staff member.
- Know your message. Practice making your case clearly and quickly. If it's a busy day, your meeting may last as few as 10 minutes. If there are several of you, work out in advance who will speak first and what they will address. Don't waste people's time with long or repetitive presentations. Not everyone may be able to speak.

Sample Sign-On Letter/Letter to Congress

Cosponsor and Pass Without Delay the End Racial Profiling Act

Dear [Decision Maker],

The End Racial Profiling Act (ERPA S. 1670) has now been introduced in the House and Senate, and I am writing to urge you to cosponsor and pass the bill without delay. ERPA was introduced in the same month that we honored Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who famously called on Americans to judge people not “by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Racial profiling refers to the practice used primarily by law enforcement officials of targeting and/or treating individuals unfairly based on their perceived race, ethnicity, religion, or national origin. The act of racial profiling was wrong when King urged its end; and it is wrong now.

Horrific examples of racial profiling are occurring all over the country. These incidents are tragically common practice in some places as a result of anti-immigration laws like those passed in Arizona and Alabama. Similarly, in the years since 9/11, the federal government has diverted massive investigatory resources on Arabs and Muslims, singling them out for questioning, detention, and other law enforcement activities based on their religion or ethnicity rather than their individual behaviors.

If we act now, we can begin to re-establish trust in law enforcement and ensure that everyone who lives in our country is protected.

- If you are meeting with a group, be clear on each person’s role and the speaking order. It may be helpful to identify someone to open and close the conversation. Prepare materials to leave behind with the legislator or staff, such as fact sheets or a memo summarizing your positions.
- If they agreed to take any actions, remind and thank them—and offer your assistance if appropriate.
- If you promised to get them any additional information or answers to questions, do so promptly.

Make the Visit Count:

- Introduce yourself and start on a positive note. Can you start by saying thanks for a recent vote or public statement?
- State your positions, concerns, or requests clearly and directly. Bolster your facts with personal stories about how the issue affects the legislator’s constituents and district.
- If you don’t understand your legislator’s opinion or legislative obstacles to success, ask for an explanation.
- If you’re not sure how to answer a question, say so honestly, promise to get the information, and follow through quickly.
- Leave several copies of your materials and contact information for yourself and your coalition members.
- Be sure to thank the legislator and/or staff for spending time with you.

Following Up:

- Write or call legislators and staff after the visit to thank them for their time.

- Share any information or insights you gained from the meeting with your colleagues and coalition members and decide together if any additional follow-up is needed.
- Maintain a relationship with people you met with by sending them updates on your activities.

Briefing a Group of Staff

You may be able reach a number of congressional or state legislative offices at once with a staff briefing. Use a staff briefing to share the results of polling or other research, discuss a new report, or talk about the formation of a new coalition and its plans. A briefing can be particularly useful when you have a prominent speaker, like a pollster or issue expert, who would not have time to visit numerous offices with you. Start with the office of a legislator who is friendly to your cause; a staff member can help you reserve a room in the Capitol or a legislative office building and should be able to help you reach out to relevant staff in other offices. Make your presentation brief to encourage questions and conversation. Have plenty of written materials. Get everyone to sign in so that you can follow up individually with everyone who attends.

Presenting Testimony

Presenting testimony at a congressional or legislative hearing is an extremely good opportunity to make your

case to legislators, establish credibility as an expert voice on an issue, and raise the visibility of your organization or campaign. Hearings don't have to be about the pros and cons of a specific piece of legislation; they can be organized to explore an important issue or examine options for dealing with a problem. Encourage friendly legislators on committees relevant to your issue or campaign to plan hearings and invite your campaign's spokesperson(s) to present testimony. Be sure that you, or anyone who is providing testimony, knows your issue in enough depth to anticipate opposing viewpoints or hostile questions and prepare answers in advance. Practice, practice, practice.

Calls, Letters, and Emails

Generating large numbers of calls, emails, or letters into legislators' offices can be an important and effective organizing strategy. Follow the legislative process carefully to know when key legislators need to hear from your supporters. Generate calls or emails through your own newsletter, email list, or through volunteer phone banks.

Congressional offices receive a large volume of communications, especially on controversial issues or legislation. And they pay attention to the number of calls or other contacts as a way to gauge the intensity of their constituents' interests on different sides of an issue.

As you would expect, thoughtful individual letters will have a much greater impact than a form letter or pre-printed postcard. If you're able to get a number of community leaders to write their own letters explaining

why your issue or campaign is important to them, that message will be heard. You can also gather multiple signatures on a single letter. A sign-on letter can be useful in demonstrating the breadth and diversity of support for your proposal or issue campaign and in generating media interest. You might even consider multiple sign-on letters, such as one from business leaders, one from religious leaders, one from educators, etc.

Unless you have a strong personal relationship with your legislator, you aren't likely to get through on a phone call, but it's worth asking. If you can't reach the legislator directly, ask to speak with the staff member who works on the issue you're calling about. If you are calling about a specific piece of legislation, especially if it's controversial, the person answering the phone may be getting a lot of calls and may simply take your position to tally it one way or the other.

It is entirely appropriate and legitimate for nonprofit organizations as well as individuals to meet with public officials to educate them on issues, provide them with information about organizational priorities, and answer questions from elected officials and staff.

If you have questions about tax-exempt nonprofit organizations engaging in a certain amount of legislative advocacy—or lobbying for passage of a particular piece of legislation, the Alliance for Justice is a great resource. The Alliance for Justice educates and trains nonprofit organizations about how to legally be effective advocates for those who are often left out of the policy making process. Get more information at www.afi.org/for-nonprofits-foundations/about-advocacy/.

Calling Members of Congress

It's most effective to call your own senators and representatives, but there may be times when you want to call other members if they serve on a committee or serve in a leadership position that puts them in position to help get a bill passed. You can reach any congressional office by calling the Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121 and asking the operator to be transferred to the office you are trying to reach. Tell the person who answers the phone why you are calling and what issue you are calling about. You may be asked to speak to a staff person who deals with the issue you are concerned about. If an office is being flooded with calls for and against a particular piece of legislation, the person answering the phone may simply tally your position.