



How to Win Legislative Victories and Influence Legislators in Indiana – An Open Letter to Public Affairs Professionals

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Abstract: *Every January in Indianapolis, members of the General Assembly—100 Representatives and 50 Senators—convene to vote on bills that will modify, or create, Indiana laws. These elected officials rely on suggestions from constituents, lobbyists, and public affairs practitioners. By understanding the timeframe and process of bill creation, non-profit and government professionals can effectively advocate for their agencies and stakeholders.*

As a public affairs professional, you have the ability to shape, and even craft, new laws in Indiana. Members of the General Assembly need your help creating bills that benefit their constituents. If you understand the legislative process, and know when to reach out to elected officials, you can affect powerful change for your stakeholders. As a former Statehouse intern, I learned the most effective time periods for influencing legislators, and I want to share them with you.

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For a bill to become a law, the bill must navigate a complex journey with many potential dead ends. In special circumstances, the bill can be carried to the end by highly motivated legislators. During the 2012 legislative session, Senate Bill 4, which strengthened penalties for human trafficking, passed the House and Senate in less than a month because legislators wanted it in effect before the Super Bowl^{2,3}. However, for the vast majority of bills, becoming a law is a process of four to six months with potential detours looming along the way. As a public affairs professional, you must be prepared to steer your law around these obstacles with the help of a legislator, or two.

In Indiana, a bill's journey must begin with a legislator agreeing to sponsor the bill. No matter how many lobbyists or constituents clamor for legal changes, a senator or representative must agree to attach his or her name to the document before it can begin its journey through the legislative process. Finding a legislator sympathetic to your organization's needs depends on your stakeholders and clients. For non-profit organizations, you should start with the representative and senator representing the district where the organization is headquartered. For government agencies and non-profit organizations needing additional contacts, look for legislators with a personal interest in your mission. For example, an education-oriented

² http://www.in.gov/portal/news_events/74075.htm

³ <http://www.in.gov/legislative/bills/2012/IN/IN0004.1.html>

organization should contact teachers and members of the Education committee. Once you have found a legislator willing to sponsor your bill, the elected official must bring it to the Legislative Services Agency (LSA).

The LSA is a non-partisan agency that employs legal and financial experts who evaluate bills and the potential effects on existing law, state revenue, and expenditures. In many cases, the LSA crafts the language of a bill based on the vision of the legislator who brings the idea to the agency. Because there are 150 legislators, all of whom must send their bills through the LSA, the agency needs several months to evaluate each bill. If you want a bill to pass during session, which begins in January, you cannot start working on it any later than the fall. Regardless of when you begin, once your bill has passed through the LSA, the next step is filing it with the leader of your legislator's chamber.

The leader of the House of Representatives is referred to as the Speaker, and the Senate is led by the President pro tempore; both have great power in their respective chambers because they can single-handedly stop bills. Senators can start filing bills with the President pro tempore in October, and Representatives can start at the end of November. Both leaders stop accepting bills in the first two weeks of January. Once a bill is filed with the office of the Speaker or the President pro tem, it is either killed or assigned to a committee. For public affairs practitioners, this may be the most nerve-wracking step of guiding a bill through the legislative process. Legislative leaders are extremely busy and difficult to reach, meaning you will most likely not have a chance to lobby for your bill. Hopefully, your sponsoring legislator will have political capital, your bill will be strong, or the Speaker or President will take a liking to your bill and it will pass on to committee.

A committee is a group of legislators who have experience or interest in particular areas and are theoretically well-suited to evaluate the merits of related bills. A complete list of committees can be found on the state's website⁴. Each committee is led by a chairperson who decides if and when bills are heard by the committee. Before committees vote on bills, they want to hear public testimony about the proposed law. You, or the appropriate member of your organization, should go to committee meetings to testify in support of your bills. In some cases, you may want to mobilize volunteers or other stakeholders to testify; you can also solicit individual meetings with committee members to discuss your bill before it is heard. When a committee votes on a bill, the committee can choose to amend the bill and rehear it or pass it as is. Once the bill passes committee, it goes to the floor and no further public testimony will be heard.

When a bill reaches the floor, the Speaker or President pro tem can choose to kill the bill or send it to Second Reading. During Second Reading, the bill is discussed by the entire House or Senate; legislators can propose amendments to the bill and the Speaker or President pro tem can choose to hear or deny the amendments. If the bill passes by majority vote during Second Reading, any potential amendments are incorporated and the bill is sent to Third Reading. No amendments can be added during Third Reading; legislators can only vote yea or nay. If a bill passes Third Reading, the bill is considered to have passed the House or Senate and is sent to the opposite chamber, where it again journeys through potential amendments, committees, Second Reading, and Third Reading. If a bill passes both houses, it is sent to a joint House-Senate committee where any differences—for example, if the House amended the bill and the Senate did not—are reconciled and the bill is sent to the Governor to be signed into law.

⁴ <http://www.in.gov/apps/lisa/session/billwatch/billinfo?request=getCommitteeList>

Traditional lobbying leads to frustration; your organization can spend thousands of dollars hosting a dinner or mailing information to legislators only to watch your bill die early in the legislative process. You can, however, change your lobbying tactics and see your organization succeed at the Statehouse. You work in public affairs because you're passionate and knowledgeable about your organization; now you know what you need to do to effectively share your expertise with the Indiana General Assembly.