

## CHAPTER FIVE: COMMUNICATING WITH CONGRESS

- ◆ Making Your Voice Heard in Congress
- ◆ Lobbying
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## Making Your Voice Heard in Congress

It is vital that elected officials know where their constituents stand on the issues—your letters, phone calls and visits can have a big impact in shaping their opinions. There are many ways to make your voice heard.

### Getting Others Involved

- Find volunteers (branch public policy chairs and members, members-at-large, student affiliates, coalition partners) who are willing to contact members of Congress on a regular basis and add them to your e-mail, fax, or phone tree.
- Identify potential venues for encouraging mass letter writing or phone calling. Branch meetings, state board meetings, and state conventions are good places to start.
- Provide volunteers with background information on the issue and distribute contact information for their elected officials.

### Creating a Message

- Use *Two Minute Activist*, *Action Alert*, *Get the Facts*, and Public Policy Department special alerts to get current issue information.
- Refer to the AAUW Public Policy Program brochure for a list of priority issues.
- See fact sheets and position papers or contact the public policy staff for detailed information on AAUW's priority issues.

### Contacting Legislators

- **Activate phone, fax, and e-mail trees.** Contact AAUW members and coalition partners on legislative alerts and updates. Generate communications to elected officials.
- **Visit your members of Congress.** Members of Congress are often available for meetings with constituents when they are at home in their district. To set up a meeting with your member of Congress or invite her/him to participate in an AAUW event, contact the district office and speak



### The Legislative Process

The following is the typical path for a bill in the U.S. House or Senate:

1. The bill is introduced and referred to the appropriate committee.
2. The committee holds hearings on the bill and refers it to the appropriate subcommittee.
3. The subcommittee with jurisdiction over the bill makes changes to it by offering amendments and recommending consideration by the full committee.
4. The bill moves to the full committee where additional amendments are offered before approval for floor consideration.
5. The bill comes to the floor where amendments can be offered. Senate rules usually permit greater latitude than House rules in offering amendments.
6. Members of Congress vote on each amendment to the bill, and then vote on the bill as it was amended.
7. The bill moves to the other house of Congress for approval.
8. If the bill passes both the House and Senate, it goes to Conference Committee where representatives from both chambers work out any differences between the two versions of the bill.
9. Once the differences are resolved, the House and Senate vote on the final bill, or conference report.
10. If both chambers approve the bill, it goes to the President to sign or veto.
11. If the President signs the bill, it becomes law.
12. If the President vetoes the bill, both chambers of Congress can try to override that veto with a two-thirds majority vote.

with the scheduler. Attending town meetings is another great way to learn where your member of Congress stands on issues important to women and families.

- **Make phone calls.** Get the phone numbers for members of Congress from the U.S. Capitol switchboard at 202/224-3121, government pages of your phone book, House and Senate websites [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov), or public policy staff. To reach the White House comment line call 202/456-1414.
- **Send E-mail and Write letters.** Because of the anthrax decontamination process now in place, delivery of U.S. mail to Congress and the White House is routinely delayed by as much as three months. Using e-mail or sending a fax is really the best way to make sure your voice will be heard in time to make a difference. You can easily look up contact information (including e-mail and fax numbers) for members of Congress, as well as send personalized e-mails to them through AAUW's Two-Minute Activist on the AAUW website.

#### **Building a Relationship with Members of Congress**

- Invite your legislators to speak at branch and state meetings or public forums on AAUW priority issues (but not immediately before an election, when all candidates must be invited).
- Build relationships with the legislators' staff members, especially schedulers and legislative assistants working on women's issues and education.
- Add legislators to your mailing list.
- Always call or send a letter to thank your legislators for their help.



#### **Tips on effective e-mail and letter writing:**

1. **Be brief.** Short, direct letters are the most effective.
2. **Be specific.** Deal with just one subject or issue in your letter, and state your topic clearly in the first paragraph.
3. **Be personal.** Letters are most effective when they reflect your personal experiences and views in your own words. Form letters don't carry as much weight as a letter that you have written yourself.
4. **Be sure to give your name and address.** Legislators and other decision makers pay most attention to letters that come from their constituents—people who will be voting for or against them—so it's important to let them know you are from their district. Including your contact information also enables elected officials to respond to your concerns.
5. **Be persistent.** Write often, especially to legislators who are undecided on an issue.



## **Lobbying**

### **Preparing for the Visit**

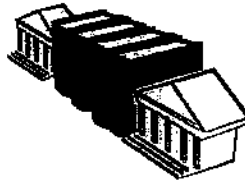
- Make an appointment to visit your member of Congress when they are home on long weekends or during congressional recesses. Congress typically convenes in early January and adjourns in early October. Dates vary, but recesses generally take place around the following times: President's Day, Easter, Memorial Day, Independence Day, the month of August, and Labor Day. Be persistent—you may need to make a number of calls to arrange the meeting.
- Make clear which issue(s) you want to discuss (no more than three).
- Gather information. Learn about your legislators' records on AAUW issues. Become familiar with the opposition's views and arguments on the issues to help you answer questions.
- Prepare materials to leave with the legislator or staff: copies of relevant AAUW position papers, the AAUW Public Policy Program brochure, and a memo or fact sheet summarizing your main concerns.
- Work in coalition to underscore the broad appeal of your position. Agree on specific talking points and lobbying goals and designate a lead spokesperson for the meeting.
- Confirm the appointment the morning of or day before the meeting. Arrive on time.

### **During the Visit**

- Identify yourself as an AAUW member with an AAUW pin or name tag.
- Introduce yourself and start on a positive note. If s/he recently voted in support of an AAUW issue, thank her/him.
- Clearly state the position of AAUW or the coalition you are representing.
- Explain your position with facts, but also use personal stories when possible. Let the legislator understand the personal ramifications or benefits resulting from their actions.
- If you don't understand something, ask for an explanation.
- Ask the legislator or staff to clarify what their position is on the issue.
- Ask the legislator to take some specific actions such as sponsoring a bill, voting for or against a pending measure, or meeting with your branch or your state board.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, but offer to get an answer.
- Thank the legislator and staff as you leave.

### **After the Visit**

- Write or call legislators and staff to thank them for their time. Remind them of anything they may have agreed to do and send additional information.
- Share the results of your meetings with your branch and with AAUW public policy staff. Share insights you have gained about legislators' concerns and ask others to lobby.
- Find out when the legislators will be in your home district hosting town hall meetings or forums and organize a group to attend.
- Maintain communication with legislators and their staff through letters, calls, and visits.



## Legislative Definitions

### **Appropriations Bills**

*Appropriations bills* fund each major department of government, and often one bill will include funding for several related departments. There are 13 appropriations bills that keep the government running and must be passed each year before October 1.

### **Continuing Resolution**

If an appropriations bill has not passed by October 1, a temporary spending bill, or *continuing resolution* (CR), keeps the government running.

### **Omnibus Bill**

If Congress fails to pass appropriations bills by October 1, and there is pressure to adjourn, a number of major spending bills are grouped into one large bill referred to as an *omnibus bill*.

### **Filibuster**

When one or several senators refuse to relinquish the floor, they are using the *filibuster* as a tactic to delay or defeat legislation. A filibuster can be ended through compromise or by invoking cloture.

### **Cloture**

A *cloture* petition is voted on by the Senate to end a filibuster, proceed to the bill, or allow amendments only relevant to the bill. A three-fifths majority or 60 senators are needed to attain cloture.

### **Mark up**

When a committee considers a bill, members analyze it line by line. This process is called *marking up* the bill.

### **Reauthorization of a Bill**

The passage of an original act is often approved for a certain number of years. After the time is up for the original bill, Congress will reexamine the bill and make changes or *reauthorize* the bill to reflect new issues of concern.

### **Conference Committee**

Legislation must pass both the House and the Senate in identical form before it is sent to the President for signature or veto. When there are differences, the legislation is referred to a *conference committee*, which is made up of members chosen from relevant House and Senate committees.