

Intro to Policy Guide:

Did You Know That Anybody Can Write a Law?

Most Americans don't realize this, but any citizen can write language for a bill, meet with their representative, and ask the representative if he or she might support legislation like it. If the representative likes the idea and thinks he or she can introduce it, the representative will have their policy staff research if there are already laws like the policy you are proposing, and what would be the implications (results) of them introducing that legislation. If the representative trusts you, you can help them research the issues and even give them language you would want them to use in the bill. The policy staff will write the bill and it will grow from there. At that point, you could help them get other representatives to sign on to the bill and keep it alive by actively advocating for it.



Case Example: Self-advocates and a group called The Arc led the effort to get “Rosa’s Law” (S. 2781) signed by President Obama in 2010. Rosa’s Law requires the federal government to replace the term “mental retardation” with “intellectual disability” in many areas of government. To pass Rosa’s Law, advocates from The Arc talked to state senators and representatives about what should be in the bill, and those senators and representatives then talked to their staff. After making sure that the language in the bill made sense, the representatives and senators then voted that the bill should be law. The bill then went to President Obama and he signed it, finally making it a federal law.

There are different levels of government: federal (national), state, municipal or county (a region), or a city/town. This guide focuses on the federal and state levels.

There are three branches of federal and state governments:

- Legislative
- Executive
- Judicial

The **Legislative** part of government is in charge of making laws. It is the Congress.



The **Executive** part of government works on leading the country and implementing the laws. At the federal level, it is made up of the President, the White House, and the federal agencies that carry out the law. At the state level, it is the governor and the state agencies.

The **Judicial** part of the government works on seeing if the law is fair. The highest level of the Judicial branch is the Supreme Court.



Common Policy Words:

Bill: A draft of a proposed law. If the bill passes Congress, it becomes a law.

Congress: The people we elect to make national laws. There are two parts to the Congress — the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House's number of representatives are based on a state's population size. The Senate has two senators from each state.



Legislation: Another word for a law. It is used to describe a law in place or a bill that's being considered.

Lobbying: Working to influence an elected official to vote a certain way. Please note that non-profit organizations with IRS 501c3 status cannot lobby.

Legislative Agenda: The goals you have when meeting with a representative. Usually includes 1-3 bills you want the representative to support.

Committee: Once a bill is assigned a number, it goes to committee. There are committees that all have specialities on various topics. For example, disability bills in the Senate often go to the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. The committee studies the bill and hosts hearings. Most bills die in committee. If committee members agree that the bill is important, they make revisions and then it will go out of committee back to everyone where it is debated on the floor. Many bills die on the floor. Those that make it out go to conference committee, to work out the bill. If the bill makes it out of the conference committee in both the House and Senate, it goes to the president or governor to be voted on.

Self Advocacy and Policy

The political process can be complicated, and many people receive high levels of education to participate in it. If your group wants to get involved with policy, it can be good to start by finding training to participate in or by joining an ally in their efforts first.



Capitol Day

In many states, local disability advocates host a “Capitol Day”, where they organize hundreds of disability advocates to come to the capitol to advocate. The Capitol Day often includes a march, a rally, and then appointments with representatives’ offices. The Capitol Day organizers typically work hard to get local media outlets to cover the event. It helps if you bring a lot of advocates with you, because the more people who attend the rally, the more it is likely to get picked up by the media or be noticed by the representatives.

Organizers typically host events before the Capitol Day to explain what the legislative agenda is to advocates. If you can’t find the legislative agenda online, ask the organizers for one, or create your own! Once you have it, you want to practice making your argument for why the representative should support what you are asking for. Keep in mind you will not have a lot of time to make your case, so you want to be as persuasive as possible in a short period of time (likely under 10 minutes). Data and statistics are very important for making your argument, especially if you can prove that you can save money by what you are proposing.

Appointments

When scheduling an appointment with a representative, try to make the appointment as far in advance as you can, usually 4-6 weeks before. If you are at the representative's office but don't have an appointment, expect to leave your legislative agenda and business card with the receptionist. You can ask to speak to the policy staffer who handles your issues, but it is likely they will be unavailable if you did not schedule an appointment.

Visiting

When visiting a legislative office, be prepared to make small talk. At the same time, your appointment time is limited, so you will want to (politely) get to the point of your visit. See ASAN's Getting What You Came For: Using Meetings to Advance an Agenda Resource Guide for more tips on meeting with the legislator.

Working with Policy Staff

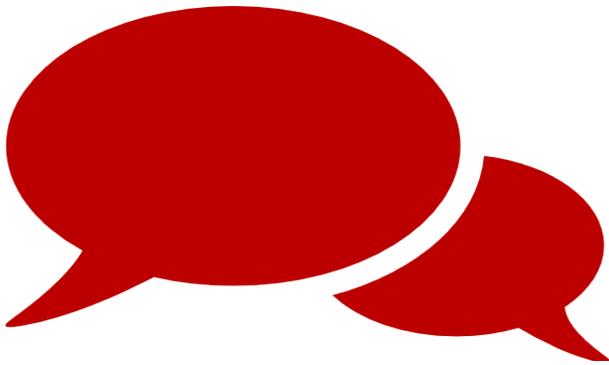
Self advocates have three key roles they can play with a legislative office: **education**, **story-telling**, and **advocacy coordination**.

Policy staff need to understand the issues so if you can become an expert in it and explain it to them, it is good.

You want to hand feed them everything, meaning that you want to make it as easy as possible for them to learn the issue.

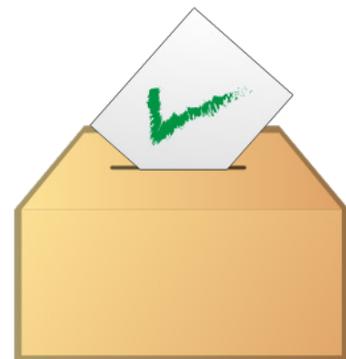


Example: if you have reports about the policy, email it to them so they don't have to look it up themselves. Everything in the legislative branch runs on research and data. The research you give them must be from trusted, unbiased sources. Statistics from a government research program are much more credible than a non-profit organization. You want to position yourself as the person they should go to when they have a question about an issue. Make sure what you share is always accurate. Also make sure that when you share your information, you do so timely. If they ask you for something and you give it to them two weeks later, it's likely that you have missed the opportunity to be involved.



After policy staff understand the issue, they will need stories that tell other people why it is important issue. You can share your story and find other people who can share theirs. This saves a lot of the representative's time and is a part of hand feeding them. Be prepared that if there is a hearing, that you might help the representative find people who can speak at the hearing.

Legislative staff need advocates to organize to bring other supporters on board. You can host campaigns that educate the public about an issue. People vote on issues because they think the constituents in their districts care about it, and need to be elected by those people again. You can also visit other representatives to ask them to support the bill. It is much easier to get an appointment with other representatives if you have someone that lives in that person's district. There are many things you can do to convince other people to support the issue, like hosting rallies, starting a petition, educating as many representatives about the issue, building coalitions, speaking out at meetings, etc. Ask the representative how you can best support their work.



If you have any questions about the Intro to Policy Guide, please contact ASAN by email at info@autisticadvocacy.org.

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Pacific Alliance is an effort funded by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to support self advocacy groups with technical assistance.

For more information about the **ASAN** or the **Pacific Alliance**, visit us at www.autisticadvocacy.org.