

California Advocacy 101: The Basics

Just like the federal government, California's state government has three branches -- judicial, legislative, and executive. Like Congress, the California Legislature is comprised of two houses -- the Assembly and Senate -- and is the branch of government that makes laws and budgetary decisions. There are 80 Assemblymembers and 40 Senators -- with each Assemblymember representing a smaller geographic area than each state Senator.

The Legislature is a full-time legislature and the process by which bills become laws is commonly referred to as the "legislative process." The Legislature gets their work done during a "two-year session" based on the legislative calendar. Think of this calendar like a grade year in high school where you advance a grade in one year; however, our Legislature goes through a grade in two years. The Legislature works January until mid-September in the first year of the two-year session (odd numbered years). In the second year of the legislative session (even numbered years) they meet from January to October.

Policy Process. Assembly Bills (called ABs) are introduced by Assembly members and Senate Bills (called SBs) are introduced by Senators. To become law, most bills must pass policy committees, fiscal committees and Floor votes determined by the legislative calendar:

- Policy committees debate the pros and cons of a bill -- the public can testify at these hearings.
- Fiscal committees debate how much bills will cost -- the public can testify at these hearings.
- Floor votes are where all 80 Assembly members or all 40 Senators vote on bills - the public is not involved in the debate on the Floor.
- Most bills must pass with majority votes (except tax or appropriations bills) and all bills must advance through each respective legislative branch before they get to the Governor. For example, an AB must pass the Assembly first, pass the Senate second, and then return the Assembly before it can get to the Governor.
- The Governor then has a specified period of time to decide whether to sign a bill into law or veto the bill.

Budget Process. The state budget is an annual multi-billion dollar spending plan that reflects the state's values and priorities. The legislative budget process runs from January to June 15th (the Governor must sign the budget by June 30th and the state's fiscal year runs from July 1st through June 30th). The State Constitution requires the Governor to submit a balanced budget proposal to both houses of the Legislature by January 10th of each year and the Governor also submits a "May Revision" to the budget with updated revenue and expenditure forecasts by May 15th of each year. Once the January budget is submitted, budget subcommittees meet to discuss and take action on the various items in the Governor's budget proposal and May Revision. With the input from the public and subject to negotiations with the Governor, the Legislature then makes any budget changes it deems necessary and votes on their final version of the budget by June 15th. The Governor then has until June 30th to sign the final budget (he/she may also blue pencil certain items as well in this final version).

Although the 2019 -2020 legislative session commenced in January, we are still at the very beginning of the legislative calendar. This means that the legislative process is just starting and most policy committees and budget subcommittees have not even held hearings yet, let alone taken Floor votes.

District Office Meetings. Most advocacy efforts whether on bills or budget issues should begin with meeting the elected official and/or their key staffers.

- Meeting with the elected official -- either an Assembly member or Senator.
- Meeting with the District Director (DD) -- the DD manages the district office and reports to the Chief of Staff and/or the Legislator. The DD manages all district office staff and makes decisions on events, provides services to constituents, and passes along important information to Capitol staff.
- Meeting with the Field Representative (district staff) -- they do casework on constituent needs and coordinate with legislative aides in the Capitol Office on policy issues.

Preparing for your District Office Meeting

Make an appointment -- call the district office and ask to schedule a meeting with the member.

- Coordinate with partners who will be involved in the meeting -- have at least one call or meeting ahead of time to be clear on your message/request, designate a lead for the meeting, develop an agenda, and prep for possible questions.
- If you are advocating on a specific bill, do your homework -- know the current bill status: the location of the bill (either a policy or fiscal committee or on the Floor), what the bill does as of that date (bills get amended and so you want to avoid advocating for an outdated bill), when the bill is scheduled for a vote, and who is for and against the measure.
- Have copies of advocacy materials with you at your meeting -- fact sheets, reports, letters of support, and business cards.

Example Outline of the Flow of a Legislative Meeting

- Arrive early for the meeting -- the front desk may want to know how many are in your party.
- Start your meeting with introductions - state your name, organization you're representing (or if you're coming to them as a private citizen but work for X organization), and let them know you're a constituent.
- State your overall message - which issues or bills you're there to talk about.
 - Example: "We are here to advocate for eliminating the overwhelming burden of student loan debt."
 - Hand them any materials you may have brought - it should include contact information in case they have questions later.
- Personal stories and/or talking points time! Start taking turns making concise points for why you want these reforms and/or share a quick personal story.
 - Example talking points for making points and personal stories:
 - "I have student loans and this is what I experienced and am still dealing with..."
 - "I think there needs to be more done on student debt because when I work with our community members we serve I see"
 - "I feel strongly about student debt because I see in my community"
- If you are asked questions that you aren't sure how to answer, be honest and if you do not know the answer, indicate you will get back to them with a response soon:

- Example response: “Thank you for your question, we don’t have that information with us to today/not at the top of my mind, and we want to be sure to provide you with the most accurate and up-to-date information. We will follow up and will get you an answer.”
- Feel free to ask questions!
 - Examples: “What have you done on these issues?” “Where do you stand on these issues?” “Have you introduced any bills this year that support our causes?” Are their other members we should meet with on this issue?
- To end the meeting, thank them for their time and ask to take a picture with them - use this opportunity to also do some social media advocacy!

Other Types of Advocacy Activities

Letters (support/oppose)

Phone Calls

Testifying at Hearings

Rallies

Lobby Days

Petitions

Stakeholder/Coalition Actions

Social Media Actions

Important Resources (websites)

NextGen Policy - <https://nextgenpolicy.org/>

Find your representatives! - <http://findyourrep.legislature.ca.gov/>

State Assembly -- <https://www.assembly.ca.gov/>

State Senate -- <https://www.senate.ca.gov/>

Governor’s Office -- <https://www.gov.ca.gov/>

Legislative Analyst Office -- <https://lao.ca.gov/>

California Legislative Information -- <http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/>