

## 8. Public Information

### Communicating with Legislators

**Background.** A very important component of the legislative process is citizen participation. One of the greatest responsibilities of state residents is to help elect the legislators who represent them. But citizen involvement in state government does not end at the polls.

Modern state government is considerably more complicated than state government of 200 years ago. Citizens can help their senators and representatives by sharing opinions and ideas. This input is very important as legislators decide about issues and pending legislation. One legislator's vote may make the difference between a win and a loss.

Legislatures are responsible for translating the public will into public policy for the states. As a result, lawmakers receive a huge amount of phone calls and mail from their constituents. So how can a citizen help his or her voice stand out? Below are some tips.

#### Effective Communications with Legislators

- Know who your legislators are and how to contact them.
- Understand the legislative process. Even the most basic understanding of the process will help you more effectively express your ideas and improve the timeliness of your communications.
- Contact your legislator about a particular issue *before* the legislature takes action on it.
- Use a variety of communication methods. Telephone, write, visit, e-mail or fax your legislator. Also consider giving testimony at public hearings held by the legislature.
- Do not assume that a lawmaker has prior knowledge of an issue. Thousands of bills are introduced into state legislatures each year, so a legislator personally may not know about each one.
- Tell your legislator what effect you think a particular bill will have if it becomes law. Use personal or local community examples concerning the effects. Be specific and concise, and use your own words.
- Suggest a course of action or offer alternatives.
- Be polite, even if you strongly disagree with the legislator. There are many sides to every issue and each one has merit. Try to understand the difficulty lawmakers may have in reaching their decisions.

**Traditional Communication Methods.** As noted above, there are a variety of ways for constituents to contact their legislators. The traditional methods are personal visits, letters or telephone calls.

Time is a very precious commodity for legislators. Lawmakers split their time between their legislative districts and the capitol. While at the capitol, they often must attend committee or caucus meetings and floor sessions. Therefore, it usually is best to prearrange personal visits with legislators and determine a meeting location, hour and length that is convenient for all parties.

Another practical way to contact legislators is by mail. A letter provides the opportunity to organize views and information into a form that legislators can keep and refer to later. To increase the likelihood that a lawmaker will read a letter:

- Be brief. If possible, limit letters to one page.
- Keep it simple. Discuss only one issue or bill per letter.
- Use your own words to state your position on an issue. Form letters do not have the effect of personal, individually written letters.
- Be polite. Present arguments in a respectful manner.
- Include your name and return address or phone number. A senator or representative may want to respond to your letter.

Telephoning a legislator is another viable communication option, especially when time is limited or travel is impractical. Remember, however, that senators and representatives receive numerous calls throughout a day, and they may not have much time to talk. Identify yourself and explain why you are calling. Keep conversations brief, polite and well prepared. When a legislator is not available, it is important to leave your name, telephone number and a brief message. Lawmakers often use telephone statistics during debate—stating, for example, “I’ve received 100 phone calls supporting this bill.”

**Facsimile.** Historically, telephone contact between legislators or legislative staff and the public meant person-to-person conversation. Today, the telephone can be used to facilitate correspondence via facsimile (fax). It is a fast way to send or receive information.

The physical ability for legislators and staff to send or receive a facsimile varies among the states. Most often they share fax machines. In fact, shared fax machines are found in over three-fourths of the legislative bodies. Lawmakers and staff from about one-third of the chambers have the ability to send or receive faxes in their own offices. (See tables 97-8.1 and 97-8.2.)

In 44 chambers, not only must legislators and legislative staff consider physical limitations to send facsimiles, they must comply with guidelines established for outgoing faxes. The states use a variety of methods to set guidelines. The New Mexico Senate and Wisconsin Assembly reported that the guidelines for outgoing faxes are set by statute. Administrative rules establish the requirements in the Rhode Island House,

Virginia Senate and Washington House. The remaining 39 chambers use an internal policy to set their guidelines. (See table 97-8.3.)

Fewer legislatures set guidelines to receive faxes. Only 24 chambers have internal policies relating to incoming facsimiles. Another six legislative bodies have limitations set by statute or administrative rule. (See table 97-8.3.)

The guidelines to send and receive facsimiles typically are established to facilitate efficient and effective use of legislative fax machines. To prevent being overwhelmed by unsolicited material, some legislative fax line numbers are not distributed to the public; they are reserved for use by legislators and legislative staff. Chambers often prohibit legislators and staff from faxing material:

- That is extremely lengthy.
- For political purposes.
- For personal or commercial reasons.
- For lobbying efforts.

As shown by Table 97-8.4, the vast majority of legislative bodies do not assign employees specifically to send or receive faxes. However, 17 chambers assign staff to send facsimiles. In the Arizona House, Hawaii House, Kansas Senate, Nevada Senate, New Mexico House, Oklahoma Senate, Pennsylvania Senate, Virginia Senate and House, Wyoming Senate and House and American Samoa House, the responsibility has been added to the duties of existing staff. The Maryland Senate and House reorganized current staff to deal with outgoing faxes. The South Dakota Legislature hired new employees, and the Kentucky Senate uses temporary session staff.

Fewer chambers have staff specifically assigned to receive faxes; this occurs in only 11 legislative assemblies—the Arizona House, Hawaii House, Kansas Senate, Kentucky Senate, Maryland Senate and House, Pennsylvania Senate, South Dakota Senate and House and Virginia Senate and House.

**Electronic Mail.** Computer technology has expanded the ways for legislators and constituents to correspond, and electronic mail (e-mail) now is a popular communication mechanism in many state legislatures. Currently, only seven chambers (shown below) do not provide their legislators with e-mail capability. In Montana, however, there are plans to change this by 1999.

Illinois Senate

Montana Senate and House

Ohio House

South Dakota Senate and House

American Samoa House

When an electronic mail message is sent to a legislator, where does it go? Most often, electronic mail is received directly by individual legislators. In 13 chambers, however, e-mail messages for all legislators are received in a central location. (See table 97-8.5.)

Have chambers established guidelines for legislative use of e-mail? The answer in 40 chambers is no. A variety of methods are used to set e-mail guidelines in another 40 chambers. Thirty-four legislative bodies use internal policies, and the procedures are spelled out by administrative rule in four and by statute in two. (See table 97-8.6.)

Guidelines for the use of electronic mail usually are established to:

- Ensure that its use is consistent with a legislature's legal responsibilities and business interests.
- Encourage responsible and efficient use.
- Outline the rights and responsibilities of users.
- Help maintain the security of the legislative computer system.
- Ensure the privacy of messages.
- Control the receipt of excessive, unsolicited messages.

Keeping up with electronic mail can be difficult at times. In many states, however, it is ultimately the responsibility of each legislator. The following chambers do not assign staff specifically to answer e-mail questions.

Alabama Senate and House	North Dakota Senate and House
Arizona Senate	Ohio Senate
Arkansas Senate and House	Oklahoma House
Florida Senate	Pennsylvania House
Georgia House	Puerto Rico Senate
Hawaii House	Rhode Island House
Idaho Senate and House	South Dakota Senate and House
Iowa House	Tennessee House
Louisiana Senate	Texas Senate and House
Maryland Senate and House	Utah Senate
Nebraska Senate	Vermont Senate
New Hampshire House	Virginia Senate
New Mexico House	West Virginia Senate
North Carolina House	Wyoming Senate and House

Although no legislature has hired new employees to deal with the influx of e-mail, the following chambers have added the responsibility of answering electronic mail to the duties of existing staff.

Alaska Senate and House	Nevada Senate and Assembly
Arizona House	New Hampshire Senate
California Senate	New Jersey Senate
Connecticut Senate and House	New Mexico Senate
Delaware House	Oklahoma Senate
Georgia Senate	Oregon Senate
Illinois House	Pennsylvania Senate
Indiana Senate and House	South Carolina House
Kansas Senate and House	Tennessee Senate
Kentucky Senate	Utah House
Louisiana House	Virginia House
Maine House	Washington Senate and House
Michigan House	West Virginia House
Minnesota Senate and House	Wisconsin Senate and Assembly
Missouri Senate	

**Table 97-8.1 Outgoing Facsimiles**

State (1)	From Legislators				From Legislative Staff			
	Sent from a central location for all legislators	Sent from locations scattered around the capitol or legislative office building	Sent from a central location for each political party	Sent from the offices of individual legislators	Sent from a central location for all legislators	Sent from locations scattered around the capitol or legislative office building	Sent from a central location for each political party	Sent from the offices of individual staff
Alabama	S	H		S	S	H		
Alaska				B				B
Arizona		B				B		
Arkansas	B			S		B		
California				B				B
Colorado	H				H			
Connecticut		B				B		
Delaware			H				H	
Florida		B		S		B		
Georgia				B				B
Hawaii	H			H				H
Idaho		B				B		
Illinois		S	H	H			B	
Indiana		S	H	S		S	H	
Iowa			H	H			H	H
Kansas	H		S				B	H
Kentucky	S					S		
Louisiana	H	S		H		B		
Maine		H				H		
Maryland	B			B	B	B		
Massachusetts								
Michigan	S	H		B	S	H	B	B
Minnesota		H	S	S	S	H		
Mississippi								
Missouri	S	H		B		B		S
Montana	B	B			B			

Table 97-8.1 Outgoing Facsimiles, cont'd.

State (1)	From Legislators				From Legislative Staff			
	Sent from a central location for all legislators	Sent from locations scattered around the capitol or legislative office building	Sent from a central location for each political party	Sent from the offices of individual legislators	Sent from a central location for all legislators	Sent from locations scattered around the capitol or legislative office building	Sent from a central location for each political party	Sent from the offices of individual staff
Nebraska	S			S	S			S
Nevada		B		H		B		H
New Hampshire	H	S		S		B		S
New Jersey				S		S		
New Mexico		B				B		
New York				H				H
North Carolina		H		H		H		H
North Dakota			B		B			
Ohio	H	S		H	H	S		H
Oklahoma	H			S	B			
Oregon			S	S				S
Pennsylvania		H		S		B		S
Rhode Island	H					H		
South Carolina		H				H		
South Dakota	B				B			
Tennessee		B				B		
Texas		B		B		B		B
Utah	H		S		H		S	
Vermont	S				S			
Virginia	H	S		B	B			H
Washington		B				B		
West Virginia	S	H		S	S	H		
Wisconsin		H		S		H		S
Wyoming	B				B			
American Samoa	H				H			
Puerto Rico				S				S

**Table 97-8.1 Outgoing Facsimiles, cont'd.**

<p>Key: S=Senate H=House or Assembly B=Both chambers</p> <p>Notes: 1. The following chambers did not return a survey: Colorado Senate, Delaware Senate, Hawaii Senate, Iowa Senate, Kentucky House, Maine Senate, Massachusetts Senate and House, Mississippi Senate and House, New York Senate, North Carolina Senate, Oregon House, Rhode Island Senate, South Carolina Senate, Vermont House, American Samoa Senate, District of Columbia Council, Guam Senate, Northern Mariana Islands Senate and House, Puerto Rico House and Virgin Islands Senate and House.</p>
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Table 97-8.2 Incoming Facsimiles

State (1)	To Legislators				To Legislative Staff			
	Received in a central location for all legislators	Received in locations scattered around the capitol or legislative office building	Received in a central location for each political party	Received by individual legislators	Received in a central location for all staff	Received in locations scattered around the capitol or legislative office building	Received in a central location for each political party	Received by individual staff
Alabama	S	H			S	H		
Alaska	B			B	B			B
Arizona	S	H			S	H		
Arkansas	B			S	H	S		
California				B				B
Colorado	H				H			
Connecticut	B				B			
Delaware			H				H	
Florida		B	S	B		B		
Georgia				B				B
Hawaii	H			H				H
Idaho	B		S		H			B
Illinois		S	H	H			B	
Indiana		S	H	S		S	H	
Iowa			H	H			H	H
Kansas	H		B				B	H
Kentucky	S					S		
Louisiana	B					B		
Maine		H				H		
Maryland	B				B			
Massachusetts								
Michigan		H		B		H	B	S
Minnesota		H	S	S	S	H		
Mississippi								
Missouri	S	H		B		B		H
Montana	B	B				B		

**Table 97-8.2 Incoming Facsimiles, cont'd.**

State (1)	To Legislators				To Legislative Staff			
	Received in a central location for all legislators	Received in locations scattered around the capitol or legislative office building	Received in a central location for each political party	Received by individual legislators	Received in a central location for all staff	Received in locations scattered around the capitol or legislative office building	Received in a central location for each political party	Received by individual staff
Nebraska	S			S	S			S
Nevada		B		H		B		H
New Hampshire	H	S		S		B		S
New Jersey				S		S		
New Mexico		B				B		
New York				H				H
North Carolina	H			H	H			H
North Dakota			B		B			
Ohio	H	S		H	H	S		S
Oklahoma	H			S	B			
Oregon		S	S	S		S		S
Pennsylvania		H		S		B		S
Rhode Island	H					H		
South Carolina		H				H		
South Dakota	B				B			
Tennessee		B				B		
Texas	H	S		B	H	S		B
Utah	H		S		H		S	
Vermont	S				S			
Virginia	B			H	S	H		H
Washington		B		H		B		
West Virginia	S	H			S	H		
Wisconsin		H		S		H		S
Wyoming	B				B			
American Samoa	H				H			
Puerto Rico				S				S

**Table 97-8.2 Incoming Facsimiles, cont'd.**

<p>Key: S=Senate H=House or Assembly B=Both chambers</p> <p>Notes: 1. The following chambers did not return a survey: Colorado Senate, Delaware Senate, Hawaii Senate, Iowa Senate, Kentucky House, Maine Senate, Massachusetts Senate and House, Mississippi Senate and House, New York Senate, North Carolina Senate, Oregon House, Rhode Island Senate, South Carolina Senate, Vermont House, American Samoa Senate, District of Columbia Council, Guam Senate, Northern Mariana Islands Senate and House, Puerto Rico House and Virgin Islands Senate and House.</p>
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**Table 97-8.3 Facsimile Guidelines**

State (1)	To Send Faxes				To Receive Faxes			
	None established	Set by statute	Set by administrative rule	Set by internal policy	None established	Set by statute	Set by administrative rule	Set by internal policy
Alabama	H			S	B			
Alaska	B				B			
Arizona				B	B			
Arkansas	S			H	S			H
California				S	H			S
Colorado				H				H
Connecticut				B				B
Delaware	H				H			
Florida				B				S
Georgia				H	S			H
Hawaii	H				H			
Idaho	B				B			
Illinois				H				B
Indiana	H				H			
Iowa	H				H			
Kansas				B			H	B
Kentucky				S				S
Louisiana	H			S	B			
Maine	H				H			
Maryland					B			
Massachusetts								
Michigan	H			S	B			
Minnesota	S			H	B			
Mississippi								
Missouri	B				B			
Montana				B				

Table 97-8.3 Facsimile Guidelines, cont'd.

State (1)	To Send Faxes				To Receive Faxes			
	None established	Set by statute	Set by administrative rule	Set by internal policy	None established	Set by statute	Set by administrative rule	Set by internal policy
Nebraska				S	S			
Nevada	S			H	S			H
New Hampshire				B	H			S
New Jersey				S	S			
New Mexico	H	S			H	S		
New York				H				H
North Carolina				H	H			
North Dakota	B				B			
Ohio	S			H	B			
Oklahoma	B				B			
Oregon				S	S			
Pennsylvania	B				B			
Rhode Island			H				H	
South Carolina				H				H
South Dakota				B				B
Tennessee	B				B			
Texas	B				B			
Utah				B	S			H
Vermont	S				S			
Virginia			S	H			S	H
Washington	S		H		S		H	
West Virginia	B				B			
Wisconsin		H		S		H		S
Wyoming				B				B
American Samoa	H				H			
Puerto Rico				S				S

**Table 97-8.3 Facsimile Guidelines, cont'd.**

<p>Key: S=Senate H=House or Assembly B=Both chambers</p> <p>Notes: 1. The following chambers did not return a survey: Colorado Senate, Delaware Senate, Hawaii Senate, Iowa Senate, Kentucky House, Maine Senate, Massachusetts Senate and House, Mississippi Senate and House, New York Senate, North Carolina Senate, Oregon House, Rhode Island Senate, South Carolina Senate, Vermont House, American Samoa Senate, District of Columbia Council, Guam Senate, Northern Mariana Islands Senate and House, Puerto Rico House and Virgin Islands Senate and House.</p>
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**Table 97-8.4 No Staff Specifically Assigned to Send or Receive Faxes**

<b>The following chambers do not assign staff specifically to send faxes:</b>	
Alabama Senate	Nebraska Senate
Alaska Senate and House	Nevada Assembly
Arizona Senate	New Hampshire Senate and House
Arkansas Senate and House	New Jersey Senate
California Senate and Assembly	New Mexico Senate
Colorado House	New York Assembly
Connecticut Senate and House	North Carolina House
Delaware House	North Dakota Senate and House
Florida Senate and House	Ohio Senate and House
Georgia Senate and House	Oklahoma House
Idaho Senate and House	Oregon Senate
Illinois Senate and House	Pennsylvania House
Indiana Senate and House	Rhode Island House
Iowa House	South Carolina House
Kansas House	Tennessee Senate and House
Louisiana Senate and House	Texas Senate and House
Maine House	Utah Senate and House
Michigan Senate and House	Washington Senate and House
Minnesota Senate and House	West Virginia Senate and House
Missouri Senate and House	Wisconsin Senate
Montana Senate and House	Puerto Rico Senate
<b>The following chambers do not assign staff specifically to receive faxes:</b>	
Alabama Senate and House	Nevada Senate and Assembly
Alaska Senate and House	New Hampshire Senate and House
Arizona Senate	New Jersey Senate
Arkansas Senate and House	New Mexico Senate and House
California Senate and Assembly	New York Assembly
Colorado House	North Carolina House
Connecticut Senate and House	North Dakota Senate and House
Delaware House	Ohio Senate and House
Florida Senate and House	Oklahoma Senate and House
Georgia Senate and House	Oregon Senate
Idaho Senate and House	Pennsylvania House
Illinois Senate and House	South Carolina House
Indiana Senate and House	Tennessee Senate and House
Iowa House	Texas Senate and House
Kansas House	Utah Senate and House
Louisiana Senate and House	Vermont Senate
Maine House	Washington Senate and House
Michigan Senate and House	West Virginia Senate and House
Minnesota Senate and House	Wisconsin Senate and Assembly
Missouri Senate and House	Wyoming Senate and House
Montana Senate and House	American Samoa House
Nebraska Senate	Puerto Rico Senate

**Table 97-8.5 Incoming E-Mail for Legislators**

<b>State</b>	<b>Received in a central location for all legislators</b>	<b>Received in a central location for each political party</b>	<b>Received by individual legislators</b>
Alabama	H		S
Alaska			B
Arizona			B
Arkansas			B
California			B
Colorado			H
Connecticut			B
Delaware			H
Florida			B
Georgia			B
Hawaii			H
Idaho	B		B
Illinois			H
Indiana			B
Iowa			H
Kansas			B
Kentucky	S		S
Louisiana	H		S
Maine			H
Maryland			B
Massachusetts			
Michigan	H	H	B
Minnesota			B
Mississippi			
Missouri			B
Montana			



Table 97-8.5 Incoming E-Mail for Legislators, cont'd.

State	Received in a central location for all legislators	Received in a central location for each political party	Received by individual legislators
Nebraska			S
Nevada	S		H
New Hampshire			B
New Jersey			
New Mexico	S		B
New York			H
North Carolina			H
North Dakota			B
Ohio			S
Oklahoma			B
Oregon	S		S
Pennsylvania			B
Rhode Island	H		
South Carolina	H		H
South Dakota			
Tennessee	S		H
Texas			B
Utah			B
Vermont			S
Virginia	H		B
Washington			B
West Virginia			B
Wisconsin			B
Wyoming			B
American Samoa			
Puerto Rico			S

**Table 97-8.5 Incoming E-Mail for Legislators, cont'd.**

<p>Key: S=Senate H=House or Assembly B=Both chambers</p> <p>Notes: 1. The following chambers did not return a survey: Colorado Senate, Delaware Senate, Hawaii Senate, Iowa Senate, Kentucky House, Maine Senate, Massachusetts Senate and House, Mississippi Senate and House, New York Senate, North Carolina Senate, Oregon House, Rhode Island Senate, South Carolina Senate, Vermont House, American Samoa Senate, District of Columbia Council, Guam Senate, Northern Mariana Islands Senate and House, Puerto Rico House and Virgin Islands Senate and House.</p>
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**Table 97-8.6 Electronic Mail Guidelines**

<b>State</b>	<b>None established</b>	<b>Set by statute</b>	<b>Set by administrative rule</b>	<b>Set by internal policy</b>
Alabama	B			
Alaska	B			
Arizona	B			
Arkansas	S			
California	H			S
Colorado		H		H
Connecticut				B
Delaware	H			
Florida			H	H
Georgia	B			
Hawaii				H
Idaho	B			
Illinois				H
Indiana	H			S
Iowa	H			
Kansas				B
Kentucky				S
Louisiana	S			H
Maine	H			
Maryland				
Massachusetts				
Michigan	B			
Minnesota	B			
Mississippi				
Missouri	S			
Montana				B

Table 97-8.6 Electronic Mail Guidelines, cont'd.

State	None established	Set by statute	Set by administrative rule	Set by internal policy
Nebraska				S
Nevada	S		H	H
New Hampshire				B
New Jersey				S
New Mexico	H	S		
New York				H
North Carolina				H
North Dakota	B			
Ohio				B
Oklahoma	B			
Oregon				S
Pennsylvania	B			
Rhode Island				H
South Carolina				H
South Dakota	B			
Tennessee	B			
Texas				B
Utah	B			
Vermont	S			
Virginia				B
Washington			H	S
West Virginia	B			
Wisconsin			H	S
Wyoming				B
American Samoa				
Puerto Rico	S			

**Table 97-8.6 Electronic Mail Guidelines, cont'd.**

<p>Key: S=Senate H=House or Assembly B=Both chambers</p> <p>Notes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The following chambers did not return a survey: Colorado Senate, Delaware Senate, Hawaii Senate, Iowa Senate, Kentucky House, Maine Senate, Massachusetts Senate and House, Mississippi Senate and House, New York Senate, North Carolina Senate, Oregon House, Rhode Island Senate, South Carolina Senate, Vermont House, American Samoa Senate, District of Columbia Council, Guam Senate, Northern Mariana Islands Senate and House, Puerto Rico House and Virgin Islands Senate and House.</li></ol>
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