



THE AMERICAN LEGION

Department of Michigan

Welcome to The American Legion Department of Michigan. Together we will engage our U.S. Senators and U.S. Representatives to protect and expand the benefits our Veterans have earned.

Note: The views and tips provided in this manual are those of Mark Sutton, Public Relations and Legislative Director for the Department of Michigan.

Welcome to the Team Legionnaire

Dear Legionnaire,

Congratulations Legionnaire on your appointment to the American Legion Legislative Team. Your appointment to the council shows that your department sees you as a key asset in the legislative fight we wage each day in Washington, D.C.

A Long History of Legislation

The American Legion has been a part of the creation of many pieces of legislation over the past 100 years. The American Legion worked to establish one department of U.S. Veterans Affairs instead of a mix of programs scattered over the United States Government. A past national commander wrote the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act that established the original G.I Bill, and other benefits for our returning fighting men and women from World War II.

The American Legion was a strong proponent and leader in establishing the U.S. Flag Code.

Last year at our 99th Annual National Convention President Trump signed the VA Modernization Act that the American Legion had input.

We continue the fight to make the VA system better. If there is a better way to do something or a possible solution to a problem Veterans face, then we will lobby for it.

You are a valuable piece of this continuing process, because as former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neil wrote, "All Politics Are Local." You are the local connection to your representative, and they should represent the concerns of their local constituents.

Non-Partisan

In today's political climate we need to remember that we are not concerned about the party of the representative. The election happened, and the people within your district voted, and the person with the most votes won. Regardless of the party affiliation the representative still represents you and the issues that are important to you and the organizations you associate. Fortunately, most representatives are open to issues concerning Veterans. Unfortunately, most of them are not Veterans themselves, so it is imperative that members of the legislative council become the source experts for these representatives.

Welcome Aboard

Welcome aboard, we present this manual to help guide you in the process of being an effective member of the legislative council and become knowledgeable about Veteran issues.

I look forward to working with you, and if you have ideas on how we may improve this manual, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Sincerely,

Mark Sutton
U.S. Marine Veteran.

“All Politics are Local”

Former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neil wrote a book in the 1980s that should be required reading for anyone thinking of running for a political office. It should also be on your reading list if you can find a copy.

Why are you important to the Legion Legislative agenda?

The American Legion does have staff at the Washington, D.C. national office who testify in front of Congress, who speak to Representatives and Senators about the issues affecting our veterans, military, and their families. The Legion also has a legislative committee and national officers who work to effect change in Washington.

However, those staff members and national officers can give information, they can tell them how important the issue is, but if the Representative or the Senator wants they do not need to listen or act on anything since the person in their office is not a constituent. However, if the representative knows that their constituents pay attention to what the Legion Staff is doing, they will listen carefully.

The Objective

As a member of the legislative council, the objective is to build a relationship with the representative and keep them informed of the positions and bills of interest to The American Legion and Veterans. Having local Legionnaires communicate with local representatives is key to effective advocacy.

From time to time you may be called upon to encourage other constituents of the representative in your area to contact them about a piece of legislation, either by phone, mail, or email. You might also be called to meet with your specific representative or senator for clarification on their position on a specific piece of legislation.

LET'S BEGIN

It is our objective with this manual to make this process as simple as possible. As time goes on you will understand more and develop your methods of working with your representative. The following steps will provide a starting block in this process.

Step 1:

Who is your representative?

I do not ask this thinking you may not know their name. However, I do know that some do not know their name and where does one begin.

To find out who represents you in the U.S. House of Representatives go to ***www.house.gov/representatives***

In the upper right corner of the website, you will see a "Lookup" search box you can use to enter your zip code. If more than one representative covers a zip code, it will then ask you for your street address to narrow down the selections.

Once you have found your representative, click on their name and it will take you to their page, and I recommend you bookmark the page.

Step 2:

Sign Up, Like, or Follow

When you go to their web page, some representatives will ask you to sign up for a newsletter or join a mailing list.

I recommend you sign up for each of their newsletters to keep up to date on any town hall meetings, legislation they are working on, or legislation they have voted on recently.

I also recommend if you are a user of Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, or other social media sites to Like, Follow, or connect with your representative on their accounts. These services provide another way to keep current with what they are doing on your behalf in Washington.

Take note of their office addresses, emails, and phone numbers. Do not rely on only the Washington, D.C. office. When sending mail, it can be delivered faster if sent to their local office instead. Sometimes developing strong relationships with the staff who work in the local office can help with legislative advocacy.

Step 3:

Create a Profile

Legislative advocacy is like the profession of sales. Salespeople want to know as much as they can about their prospective customers. As legislative advocates, we want to know as much as we can about our representatives so that we can be the most effective.

While on their web page take some notes and make a profile of them.

1. Who are the staff members and what office do they work in and what are their duties?
 - a. Name
 - b. Title/Area of expertise
 - c. Which office do they work out of, local or Washington, D.C.?
 - d. Email address and Phone?
2. Is the representative married or single?
 - a. If married, spouses name?
3. Do they have children?
 - a. How many and how old are the children? (If old enough they might be interested in several of The American Legion programs, like Boys State or Girls State)
4. Did they serve in the military? What branch of service?
5. Do they have a son or daughter serving in the military?
6. What House Committees are they members?
 - a. Are they the chairmen of any committees?
7. Are they members of any committees related to defense or the veteran's administration?
8. What was their profession before running for office?
9. When is their birthday? (yes, send them a birthday card)
10. What are their interests? Hunting, fishing, golfing, reading, etc.

You may find other information to add to your profile notes, none of which is bad to have.

Why this information?

Knowing information about your representative is good practice to allow for good conversation when meeting with them. If they are on a specific committee, they could be taking up legislation that is critical to Veterans and important to The American Legion.

As the saying goes, ***"The More You Know."***

Now that you know who your representative is, it is time to begin communicating.

What is the stance of The American Legion?

Note: by taking this legislative council position you have agreed to represent the views and positions of The American Legion before the U.S. Congress.

The American Legion offices in Indianapolis and Washington, D.C. provide many resources to keep Legionnaires informed of positions and legislation pending in Congress.

Go to www.legion.org/publications, scroll down to the Legislative section and there are two items to print.

1. The Legislative Agenda trifold summary. The trifold is a simple list of the current Veteran topics and Legislative importance the Legion is currently working on. The trifold is not a complete list, but it is some of the major pieces the Legion would like to see worked on.
2. The American Legion Legislative Agenda booklet. The booklet will expand on each of the topics to give you a better understanding of specific issues and legislation.

These two pieces of information are updated during a legislative session of Congress. A legislative session is two years. From January 1 after a House election until December 31 two years later, after another election. Any legislation not passed in a session is dead and must be brought back up in the following legislative session.

Those are not the only items the American Legion supports. The National Executive Committee meeting in the fall and the spring each year at any of those meetings, resolutions may be brought forth to seek the approval from the NEC make it the official position of The American Legion.

Go to archive.legion.org and click on "Resolutions and Founding Documents of the American Legion" and you will find the list of resolutions the NEC approved during their meetings.

Who determines the issues presented to The American Legion?

Resolutions are written by a local American Legion post, department, or committee. The issue is brought up by a Legionnaire in the form of a resolution and sent up the chain of command to see if it eventually is brought up and discussed at the NEC.

What should Legislative Council members do with these resolutions?

If you keep track of the resolutions and you see a resolution on a legislative topic that is important for Veterans, then print it off and send it to your representative. In the letter, you want to express your support for the issue in the resolution and then ask appropriate questions. One question to ask the representative is to investigate what is being done. It could be that there is legislation written and waiting for the action to take place on it. Ask them to act by voting yes or no or maybe they are on a committee it is assigned.

Start Engaging

At this point, the research has been done, and you should be following or receive emails on when your representative will be from time to time.

Let's get to know them now.

The following is a suggestion on how to begin the process of letting your representative get to know you and you to engage them.

K I S S

Keep it Simple Soldier

- Take one resolution or legislative piece for the legislative center that the American Legion is working to pass. Read it thoroughly and then write a letter to your representative on why you feel they should support or not support the legislation. List pros and cons if you are able and what it would mean for you (if it would affect you) or how it would affect Veterans you know.
- Be sure to reference any current legislation number if one has been assigned.
- Let them know specifically what you would like them to do with the issue.

Do it again

In a couple of weeks take another issue the American Legion has and write a letter on that issue, like the first one.

Make a phone call

As you learn more about the issues of the American Legion, call the representatives office and ask to speak with the representative or to speak with their legislative aide. Ask them if they are aware of the issue and if they are what is their position. If they do not know, ask if you can email the information.

Follow-up

Then follow up later to see if they received it and if they have any questions.

Townhall Meetings

Many representatives have coffee meetings in their district or townhalls — opportunities for constituents to come and ask questions. These are great places to shake hands with the representative and speak face to face with them. Don't come to overwhelm them with information but bring some. Be polite and courteous and bring the issue to their attention, what might happen is that an aide will come over and want to get more information from you. Don't feel put off, by the representative if it happens, sometimes the aide is the right person to speak with, and you will get more time with them.

Remember our issues are not the only ones they are working with, they rely on their aides to help them understand the issues. What could happen is the next time you speak to the representative they will be up to speed on the issue and engage with you more.

Washington Conference

The American Legion Washington Conference is held in February or March of each year. They are scheduled out for the next four to five years; the dates are published at www.legion.org/calendar. Information about the Washington Conference can be found at www.legion.org/washingtonconference.

On Tuesday at the Washington Conference, the Legion Family members who attend the conference spend the day visiting their representatives and sharing the legislative agenda of The American Legion. It is an opportunity for the Legion to place the agenda right into Representatives and Senators hands.

Preparing for the Washington Conference

Will you be attending the Washington Conference? If so, preparations start in mid-December. Legionnaires want to make the most of this trip, because it is fast paced, and it is very important to the cause.

Step One: In mid-December look at the dates for the upcoming conference. Find the date of Tuesday that falls during the conference. Call or go to your Representatives website and schedule an appointment for the late morning (11 or 11:30 a.m.) or early afternoon for that day.

Note: On Tuesday morning there is a conference rally for the Legion before everyone heads to the hill. It is usually completed by 0930 or 1000.

Step two: Regularly check the Legion Legislative web page and the Washington Conference page to see the legislative agenda being shared that year.

Step three: If the points paper is out before the conference be sure to read that to understand the issues thoroughly.

Step four: At the Washington Conference attend the “KNOW BEFORE YOU GO” meeting. Check the schedule, but it usually happens on Monday afternoon. This hour-long brief gives more information about the issues and the Legions stance.

Step five: Buddy up! Find others from your department and schedule your visits, so a couple of Legion family members are together for each visit. The person who is the constituent for that rep is the lead. If you have someone who is more versed on the issues in the group let the constituent speak first and introduce the issues expert to the rep. Having several Legion caps in one room sends a powerful message.

Step six: If the agenda and points papers are available before leaving for Washington make enough copies for everyone, have your contact information available and plan what you kind of questions you will be asking them ahead of time.

Make the most of the visit

- Get a picture of you, the group, and the Representative together.
- Post the picture to your social media accounts using the hashtags TAL provides for the conference.
- When you return home, send a thank you note.
- Send the picture and a write up to your local paper letting everyone know you were visiting with the rep about Veteran issues.
- If the Representative voted on an issue, we have been following or are in favor; consider bringing a certificate of appreciation thanking them for their support on that issue.

What if you cannot make it to the Washington Conference?

Not everyone can make it to the conference. Check with your Department Legislative chairman or Department Adjutant to find out who handles the coordination of the visits at the conference. If no one from your representative's office is going, then schedule a visit for when they are in the district. Print off the information from the website and have the meeting at their local office or coffee shop.

Again, if you can bring another Legionnaire, numbers matter, don't forget the picture and use the hashtag national creates.

Thank you for your dedication and service

Being a volunteer on the Legislative Council is a very important job, and we appreciate the time and energy you put into this position. We hope this information has provided you with the right resources to be effective for the American Legion and for the Veterans we serve.