

HASS Government Communications: Getting Started

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1: Introduction

It may feel daunting to some, but advocating for policy change is truly one of the most effective ways to help animals, your organization, and your community. With the passage of one effective new law, you have the ability to impact thousands of animals at once and change the outcome for animals in your care for years to come. By professionalizing the way animal shelters work on policy issues, we can truly take control of our collective destiny as a profession and work together to achieve big changes. We understand that this process can be completely overwhelming and we designed this toolkit with that in mind. We hope it empowers you to engage with your elected officials regularly and in the most effective way possible.

2: Rules for Legislative Engagement (Including When And How To Hire A Lobbyist)

If you are employed by a municipal or county shelter, or you have a contract with a government shelter, you need to first make sure you are coordinating your advocacy efforts with that entity. You don't want to overstep their process and end up on the wrong side of your employer. These efforts can be helpful and expand your capacity to participate in the legislative process in a meaningful way. In fact, most cities have a liaison at the legislature to represent their best interest. If you reach out to that person in advance, they can add your bill to their priority bill list and ensure the delegation of elected officials from your city are aware of their support for your issue. This person can also be your eyes and ears at the Capitol when you are unable to be there in person by sharing feedback from offices, hearing schedules, and lobbyist insight.

It's important to note that nonprofit 501(c)(3) shelters **can** legally engage in lobbying activities and even hire a lobbyist to represent them at their state legislature! However, nonprofit shelters should familiarize themselves with the basic rules of engagement prior to taking on lobbying activities. *This section is general information only and not to be construed as legal advice. If your organization is looking for a legal opinion about particular activities, seek legal counsel to better understand your specific situation.*

There is a difference between issue advocacy and legislative lobbying. Issue advocacy is an umbrella term that describes all of your efforts to advocate for broad changes to an "issue". For example, talking with a legislator about your city's need for more spay/neuter resources or posting a social media story about the benefits of TNR programs. Conversely, a nonprofit engages in legislative lobbying when they speak to a legislator about a specific policy or piece of legislation OR direct the public to engage with their legislators on a specific policy or piece of legislation. For example, if you call your state legislator and ask them to support, oppose, or introduce a specific bill or ordinance, you're participating in legislative lobbying. Similarly, it's legislative lobbying if you post on social media asking all of your followers to call their legislators and ask them to support or



oppose a specific piece of legislation. You only need to track the staff time and expenditures of legislative lobbying activities, NOT general issue advocacy.

Pat Libby and Associates published "[The Lobbying Strategy Handbook](#)" and they have a helpful table describing the ways in which nonprofits engage in direct and grassroots lobbying:

2.1: Direct Lobbying: Taking a position on specific legislation; Communicating position directly to legislators or their staff.

2.2: Grassroots Lobbying: Taking a public position on specific legislation; Communicating that position to your followers; Asking your followers to take a specific action.

2.3: The IRS generally relies on the "Expenditure Test" to ensure that nonprofits aren't engaging in an undue amount of lobbying. Under the Expenditure Test, the IRS has created a sliding scale for calculating lobbying expenditures based on an organization's total budget. For nonprofits spending \$500,000 or less on their "exempt purposes expenditures," (which is going to be your general, day-to-day expenditures) direct lobbying expenditures are limited to 20% of that amount, or up to \$100,000. For an organization of that size, grassroots lobbying would be further limited to only 25% of the total direct lobbying expenditures ceiling (in this example, then, grassroots lobbying would be limited to \$25,000). This is a significant amount of lobbying expenditures and a vast majority of animal shelters never even come close to approaching this ceiling!

2.4: There are several other clearly defined and important exemptions to the lobbying rules. The following activities do NOT need to be tracked as lobbying by a nonprofit pursuant to federal regulations (there may be state requirements so don't forget to check your state's lobbying registration rules!):

2.4.1: Regulatory advocacy at state agencies

2.4.2: Communication to your followers *without* a call to action (i.e. if you're just giving them legislative updates, but not asking them to contact their legislators)

2.4.3: Public testimony

2.4.4: "Self-defense" lobbying on policies impacting the broad nonprofit community. For example, lobbying against a bill that would reduce property tax exemptions for nonprofits in your state.



3: What is the Legislative Process and How Do I Effect Change?

3.1: Longevity and Sustainability are key.

It can all feel insurmountable and we need to help focus on relationship building in the interim to achieve session success.

3.1.1: Do your homework on the legislative process and key legislative champions before your state's session begins.

Don't wait until the session starts to create your legislative session game plan. You will be behind and that will add a lot of stress to your experience at the Capitol. Some examples of work that can be done before the session starts:

3.1.1.1: Research the legislative calendar for an upcoming session.
Note important dates like bill introduction deadlines in your calendar.

3.1.1.1.1: List of all 50 states, their legislative webpage, session dates ([link](#))

3.1.1.1.2: Understanding state legislative schedules ([Legislative Sessions Dates link](#))

3.1.1.1.3: [Map of states and current session companion animal related bills](#) password: APGLT

3.1.1.2: Coalition-building

Coalition building is one of the most critical steps to take in gaining policymaker support for your issue. Outside of like-minded animal welfare organizations at the local, state, and national level, consider looking for non-traditional organization support like law enforcement, social justice, veterinary, and corporate/business interests that would be willing to sign onto a support letter and perhaps even testify at the hearing.

3.1.1.3: Identify key volunteers who will participate in your work at the Capitol.

3.1.2: Practice boundary-setting and saying “no” to other groups working at the Capitol.

There will likely be many more bills that you will feasibly/reasonably be able to advocate for or against. Assess your capacity for advocacy (testifying, emails and calls to legislators, writing op-eds, sending out action alerts to your volunteers) and say NO to any requests that will extend your resources beyond capacity. *Note: legislative sessions are stressful and it can feel like the success of a campaign to pass or*



defeat a bill rests on your shoulders. It doesn't! Identify your priorities, and stick with them.

3.2: Manage expectations, always going to be opposition. ALWAYS

Managing expectations of yourself and others in the middle of a legislative session can be a monumental task so it's good to assess and identify your expectations before the session has begun and keep checking in with yourself throughout.

There will always be opposition and obstacles to your bill. Always. Most of us will be working on bills that are controversial, either with certain legislators or even between various factions of the animal welfare movement. There will always be pushback against your bill and sometimes that pushback will stem simply from political-ideological differences, not from any substantive flaw in the solution you're proposing for your identified problem. Even a bill that seems benign will almost certainly end up facing obstacles during session. Legislators may even opt to sacrifice your bill in order to move forward with a different bill that is higher on their priority list.

It's hard, but try not to take these obstacles and opposition personally. The more you can recognize that your issue is just one of hundreds, or even thousands, of bills any given legislator sees, the easier it will be to stay emotionally disconnected from setbacks and help you logically figure out how to move past these speedbumps. Instead of being reactive and responding emotionally to points of opposition, **keep an updated Frequently Asked Questions or Facts versus Fiction document** handy so that you and your allies can respond consistently and succinctly to your opposition.

It will likely take more than one legislative session to pass a bill, particularly if it's a controversial one. Go into your first session with a new bill with the expectation that the first year will be an "education" session, where your primary goal is to help legislators understand this new issue and why this bill is the solution. Remember, they probably don't know anything about the problems you're dealing with! Help them understand in a kind, thoughtful manner. Managing your expectations of what success looks like for any given bill or legislative session will help curb your frustration during the legislative process and keep you motivated to show up, daily, in order to advance your goals.

3.3: [Offensive Vs. Defensive Approaches And Strategies](#)

When preparing a legislative advocacy strategy, you'll want to develop a comprehensive plan for any offensive work you're pursuing. Before the session begins, remember to learn the timeline of the legislature and process for how a bill becomes a law in your state as discussed in the first part of section three. For example, the [Virginia General Assembly published this explanation](#) online. **Remember — the earlier you start, the better.** Once you understand the timeline, you can lay out your offensive strategy.



3.3.1: Define your objective and do your research.

What is it that you are looking to change, and what will the impact be? Has any legislation like what you're proposing been introduced in your or other states before? If so, what was the outcome?

3.3.2: Identify stakeholders.

Who is in the animal welfare/protection space in your community/state? Are there other players who may engage?

3.3.3: Draft bill language.

Write down what you want your bill to do. It doesn't have to be in the form of bill language (a legislator and/or legislative counsel can help with that), but have a document outlining (1) the problem, (2) what the bill would do, and (3) how the bill would solve the identified problem. If a similar bill has been passed in another state, start there. Don't recreate the wheel if there is a statute out there you would like to use as a template.

3.3.4: Identify a potential primary sponsor for your bill

This is most likely your legislator but could be a different legislator if you know of a particular animal advocate at the Capitol. Reach out to their district office to connect with staff there. **This should happen well before the start of a legislative session!** Once a sponsor is identified, you can start to ask some questions about the path this bill might take:

- Will there be a companion bill in the other chamber?
- Does the legislator have any idea what committee the bill(s) might go through? If so, you can start looking at those committee members, in particular, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the committee(s).
- Who does the legislator think would be the primary opposition at the Capitol to the bill? Do they think leadership (Governor, Speaker, Lt. Governor) will be supportive or oppose?

3.3.5: Find sponsors and identify cosponsors.

Rallying support for your legislation before it's been introduced will increase the likelihood of it moving through your state's legislative process. *This should also happen well before the start of a legislative session!*

3.3.6: Educational Materials

Once that groundwork has been laid and again before the session has begun, you'll need educational materials to share with any relevant or interested parties. Draft factsheets, sample letters to the editor (LTEs), testimony, and talking points. **If you have all of these drafts done before session starts, all you have to do is make small updates once there is a bill number and as the bill moves through the legislative**



process! These are time-consuming projects and you will be much less stressed if you're not having to put these together from scratch during session.

3.3.7: Finally, once you have a sponsor, **submit your bill to legislative counsel to have it filed.**

It's important to stay vigilant throughout the legislative session and keep track of bills that have been filed in your state using keywords. **Examples:** Animal, pet, puppy mills, spay, neuter, breeder, kennel, dangerous, vicious, dog, cat, canine, feline, animal shelter, humane society, veterinary, breed, euthanasia, etc.

Once you have a bill that you'll be working against, ask yourself these questions:

- Can this bill be amended so that it is not harmful to my work and community?
- How would this bill impact my organization's mission and goals?
- How would this bill impact the community I serve?

Once you have the answers to those basic questions, you can start drafting collateral and scheduling meetings with the bill author and the committee members the bill has been assigned to. Often you can stop a bad bill by speaking with the author. Importantly, with your first touch to any bill author or member, your approach in your communications should be to educate, not attack them.

In many instances, legislators are not experts in these issues and the bill was borne out of a constituent request. So, if you can talk to the sponsor and help them understand some of the possible unintended consequences you may be able to work with them to edit the bill or stop it before it moves any further. If the bill can be amended, be prepared with your recommended changes when you meet with the sponsor/author.

If the sponsor is not amenable to amending or pulling their bill, you will have to be prepared to stop the bill in committee. Once a bill gets out of committee, it is much harder to amend or stop, so target members of the committee where the bill has been assigned to meet with and share your prepared talking points.

4: How to Connect with State Legislators

4.1: Relationship Building Tips and Best Practices

4.1.1: Know the session schedule – Legislators are easier to get a hold of when they are back home in their district and not in session.



4.1.2: Add them to your organization's mailing list so their office can stay up to date on the good work you are doing in their community.

4.1.3: Research them on their campaign websites and social media channels to find out interests they have that align with your mission.

4.1.4: Sign up to be on the mailing list for your local lawmakers so you know when and how you can support those that have been helpful to your work.

4.1.5: Get to know their staff and always treat them with respect. Staff are there to brief elected officials and help guide their decision-making. It's just as important to treat them with the same respect as the elected officials.

4.1.6: Be able to state your position clearly and concisely. Develop an elevator pitch on your key issue that takes less than 60 seconds to deliver. It will come in handy when you find yourself in line for coffee and spot your local lawmaker in front of you paying for theirs. They won't have much time and your pitch should be ready!

4.1.7: Have handouts on your specific issue to leave behind. (short, clear, accurate)

4.1.8: Tell the story, but have data to back it up.

4.1.9: Reach out to other advocates that are also constituents and get them to reach out in support.

4.2: How do you choose which legislators to visit?

4.2.1: If you don't already know them, start with your legislator!

4.2.2: If travel time is a limiting factor or if you live in a geographically large state, choose the legislators that are near you. Ask these legislators (if they're friendly to your issue) who else they think would be good to visit and prep ahead of session!

4.2.3: If you know what committee your bill is likely to go through (a legislator/staff can help you with this), focus on those committee members. Or, if there's another important committee, you can focus on those members. In Texas, for example, the legislature includes the Calendars Committee through which all bills have to go before they can get a floor vote.

4.2.4: If your organization has volunteers in multiple districts, set up meetings with your volunteers and their legislators.

4.3: In-Session

4.3.1: Stay on top of the legislation. A bill's status can change at any time so keeping an eye on alerts and bill trackers daily will ensure you don't miss an important update. Here are some options:

- [Map of states and current session companion animal related bills](#)
password: APGLT



- List of all 50 states, their legislative webpage, and session dates ([HASS Government Communications WG 2022 Chart](#))
- Understanding state legislative schedules - [Ballotpedia state legislative session dates](#)
- Map of states with overlay of resources - [HASS Government Communications WG](#)

4.3.2: Provide clear position statements indicating support from a wide variety of coalition members.

4.3.3: Ask other groups and advocates to share their support with policymakers on your issue/bill.

4.4: Interim

4.4.1: Invite your local elected officials at the city, state, and federal levels to attend your events. Nothing is too big or small. This can include a community vaccine clinic or your annual fundraising black-tie gala!

4.4.2: Stay in touch and continue sharing newsletters and information that may be helpful to their constituents. (e.g. Information about pet pantries, spay/neuter services, community outreach events)

4.4.3: A visit with a legislator during the interim is more valuable than a visit during session! Legislators and staff sometimes see hundreds of people a day in their main offices at the Capitol. It's a time of immense stress for everybody involved and mid-session is not the time to expect a lot of attention from lawmakers. It can be incredibly stressful and frustrating to feel like you're not heard or making a difference during your lobbying efforts during session, or feel like you're just another face in the crowd. Protect your sanity and make your in-session visits much more meaningful by trying to visit with a handful of legislators in their district offices during the interim. They'll remember the effort you put in to meet with them outside of the Capitol!

4.5: Don't burn bridges; Express gratitude to legislators.

Remember that long-term success at your state Capitol depends on the relationships you're able to build, so do your best (it can be hard!) to be empathetic, thoughtful, kind, and helpful in your interactions with legislators and staff. Send "thank you" notes and emails, make a "thank you" or "is there anything I can help you with?" phone call to the office, tag legislators in supportive social media posts, learn about their pet's favorite toy and have one sent to the office – all of these little things will help them remember you!



5: Tips for Creating and Presenting Testimony

5.1: The Public Testimony Process

Bill hearings that include testimony from the public can vary slightly depending on the legislative body. Often, the public hearing on a bill will be a part of a larger docket of business that the legislative body must get through during the meeting. Plan for the possibility of waiting and being at the hearing room for several hours if the agenda includes more than just one issue.

You will be called up to speak – possibly as a panel with other members of the public giving testimony, depending on the legislative body – and given your specified time to testify. In some cases, you may be limited to as little as two minutes or given unlimited time to share your thoughts. Always best to write out what you plan to say in advance so you can make cuts if the time allotted is limited. There may be the opportunity for committee members to ask follow-up questions about your testimony or related issues.

5.2: Dos & Don'ts for Testifying

5.2.1: Do be thoughtful about choosing a speaker. Identify a local issue expert who is able to represent the issue, connect with legislators, and answer questions.

5.2.2: Don't just read your written testimony, though it is good practice to read over it several times before you deliver so you are comfortable with the words and can engage more during your delivery.

5.2.3: Do try to focus on telling the most impactful story, combining scientific evidence/data and personal experience storytelling.

5.2.4: Don't be defensive or overly emotional, regardless of what has been said in oppositional testimony or by oppositional legislators.

5.2.5: Do be aware of and stay under the time limit given by the legislator presiding over the hearing. When you are told your time is up, wrap up quickly, and don't try to push through additional talking points you didn't get to. You can always share your full written testimony with the offices after the fact.

5.2.6: Don't be repetitive of points others have made.

5.2.7: Do be respectful. Properly address the Committee, and remember that your remarks will be in the public record and often recorded.

5.2.8: Don't guess if you are asked a question by legislators that you don't know the answer to. It is always acceptable to answer, "I don't know the answer to that but I will find out and get back to you." Bonus points are awarded to those that actually go get the information and follow up after!

5.3: Registering to Present Testimony

While most legislative bodies that hold public hearings allow members of the public to speak in support or opposition to legislation, there is generally a specific process to register your desire to testify that must be done prior to the hearing. This could include



calling a specified number, filling out a form online, or signing your name on a piece of paper outside the hearing room an hour before the hearing starts. It's important to know what the process is for the committee, local council, or other legislative body that is hearing your bill prior to the hearing as many legislative bodies will only allow those who have properly signed up to testify. Instructions for signing up to testify for a bill are usually available on your state legislature or local legislative body's website or by calling the office of the committee where the bill has been assigned a hearing.

5.4: Presenting Handouts and Other Materials

5.4.1: One-Pagers

One-pagers are used to present the case for your position in succinct bullets with eye-catching photos and relevant data. Be mindful of impactful photo choices without being overly graphic as these can turn off some legislators and be counterproductive. This is not the place to overwhelm with too much information. You should focus on plainly stating the problem the bill is seeking to address and how the bill provides a solution. You can provide citations to background and supporting information for those who may want to dive in deeper.

5.4.2: Written Testimony

You should provide a written copy of your testimony to the committee for the record. Research in advance how many members are on that committee and come with extra copies in hand to pass out. Never assume you can print your materials at the hearing. In some cases, legislators may have further debate about the issue before voting, and having your written testimony on file makes it easier for them to refer back to your points. You can use written testimony to expand on points you won't have time to discuss during oral testimony and add more information and nuance to your arguments.

You should be sure to format your letter to correctly address the legislators and legislative body, indicating your organization and position clearly near the top. Just like with oral testimony, there is often a specific way to submit the testimony for the record that will be described on the legislative body's website. The clerk for that particular meeting will often be on hand to accept and distribute your testimony to lawmakers.

6: [Sample Documents](#)

The link above includes samples of support testimony, sample one-pagers, and a legislative win example. These are just a few examples to get you started!

7: Glossary

The glossary below is designed to familiarize you with many of the terms and definitions used in the sections above and federal legislation. This reflects general application and may not encompass ALL legislative terms.

[Glossary of Legislative Terms | Congress.gov](#)



8: Additional Resources

- [Dates of 2022 state legislative sessions - Ballotpedia](#)
- [Advocacy DOs- and DONTs.pdf \(advocacyandcommunication.org\)](#) - One-Pager on nonprofit lobbying
- [The Lobbying Strategy Handbook](#) - Free, Download - Pat Libby and Associates
- [The Lobbying Strategy Handbook](#) - Purchase, Book - Pat Libby and Associates
- [Bill Carry-over overview](#)
- [Learning the Game](#)
- [Legislature at a glance](#)
- [Limiting Bill Introductions](#)
- [Inside the Legislative Process](#)
- [INDIVISIBLE STATES: HOW STATE LEGISLATURES WORK](#)
- [Bill Crossover Deadlines](#)
- [Legislative process](#)