

BUILDING **thriving**  
COMMUNITIES

# legislative advocacy guide



Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence  
**ACTION ALLIANCE**

# legislative advocacy guide

The Action Alliance invites you to join us to advocate for policies that empower survivors, prevent violence, and support thriving communities statewide. But first, the nuts and bolts of what legislative advocacy is, and where you fit into the equation as an engaged citizen.

## enclosed you will find these sections...

### 1. preparation

Find out who your legislators are and what you're going to say.

### 2. making contact

Explore the different ways you can engage with your legislators.

### 3. follow up & what's next?

Let us know how your visit went and let your legislators know you're holding them accountable.

### 4. Virginia's legislature

How it works, how a bill becomes law, terms to know, and other civics class highlights.

## preparation

### first things first: who are your legislators?

Members of the General Assembly want to hear from their constituents – the people they represent within their respective districts. Every Virginian has two legislators who represent them in the General Assembly: a State Senator and a Delegate. Visit this link to find out who they are if you aren't sure:

[whosmy.virginiageneralassembly.gov/](http://whosmy.virginiageneralassembly.gov/)

The screenshot shows the 'Who's My Legislator' website interface. At the top, there's a search bar with the address '1118 W MAIN ST, RICHMOND, VA, 23220'. Below the map, there are five columns of information for different legislators:

State Delegate	State Senator	U.S. Congress	U.S. Senator	U.S. Senator
<b>Betsy B. Carr</b> District: 69 Party: D Capitol Phone: (804) 698-1069 District Phone: (804) 698-1069 email   more info	<b>Jennifer L. McClellan</b> District: 9 Party: D Capitol Phone: (804) 698-7509 District Phone: (804) 698-7509 email   more info	<b>A. Donald McEachin</b> District: 4 Party: D more info	<b>Mark R. Warner</b> Party: D more info	<b>Tim Kaine</b> Party: D more info

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## craft your message

When calling, emailing, or writing a letter, it's important to have a clear message: why are you contacting your legislators? We can make contact for a variety of reasons, from expressing a desire for your legislator(s) to support or oppose a bill to urging them to adopt positions or develop policies that will support your community.

When reaching out, it can be helpful to begin by consulting the Action Alliance's Legislative Priorities, Policy Plan, Issue Positions, and policy resources. Your legislators' offices keep records of how many phone calls, letters, and emails they receive concerning various issues – so it can be impactful for a legislator to see a large number of their constituents reach out on similar/aligned policy issues.

When reaching out, this is the time where you can personalize an issue. If you work with survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence or with young people to prevent violence, why would you want your representative to support or oppose a bill? How does this help to shape a world that we want: a world without violence?

## stay on message

- Whatever way you engage your legislators, keep it short and stay on message. If you have 30-60 seconds to speak on the phone, what is the most important thing you want them to know? If you are calling regarding a specific bill, specify the bill and why you support or oppose the legislation. If you have a personal story to share which may take longer, try to make an appointment to speak to your legislator in person or over the phone.
- Remember that staff are very busy during legislative sessions and may not be able to read a five-page email or speak on the phone at length. If you're having trouble figuring out which details to focus on, try practicing with a friend. Based on your experience with sexual assault and domestic violence, think about what the most important message is relative to the bills up for consideration. How would your life, your family, or your clients' lives be impacted if the legislation you are advocating for is put in place?
- Most importantly – how can your legislator help? These are tough issues and it's easy to feel overwhelmed by them. There is hope, though – the General Assembly can pass legislation to help survivors and prevent violence. And your legislators really value your input, as community-based advocates, as change-makers, as survivors, and as constituents in this legislative process. Your voice is your superpower.

# making contact

## by phone

The Who's My Legislator webpage ([whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov/](http://whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov/)), which helps you identify your legislators, also provides phone numbers. Once you know who your legislators and you are ready to call, here are some pro tips:

- Remember your message prep! For phone calls, it can be helpful to write out some bullet-point notes ahead of time to make sure you know what you want to say. Remember that calls to legislative offices are often brief, 2-10 minutes at the most, but legislative offices do take note of them.
- When you call your legislator's office, the phone will be answered by a staff member (staffer).
  1. Tell the staffer that you are a constituent and you'd like to speak to a legislative aide on sexual and intimate partner violence issues.

2. When you get an aide or office member on the phone, introduce yourself "Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm a constituent of Delegate/ Senator \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_, Virginia."). "I'm calling to voice my support for House/Senate bill \_\_\_\_ and to encourage Delegate \_\_\_\_\_ to join me in supporting this issue and ensuring that all Virginians have access to safe and just communities and that we can prevent violence before it happens".

Follow your script. Talk clearly and at a measured pace and remember that the Legislative Aide that you're speaking with may not only support your issue but may encourage your legislator to take note and commit to action on the bill that you're speaking to.

3. Make sure your ask is clear and direct ("I'm asking for Delegate \_\_\_\_\_ to support House /Senate bill \_\_\_\_."). Your voice will be heard, but it doesn't hurt to repeat the ask to ensure that it's fully captured in office/message notes.

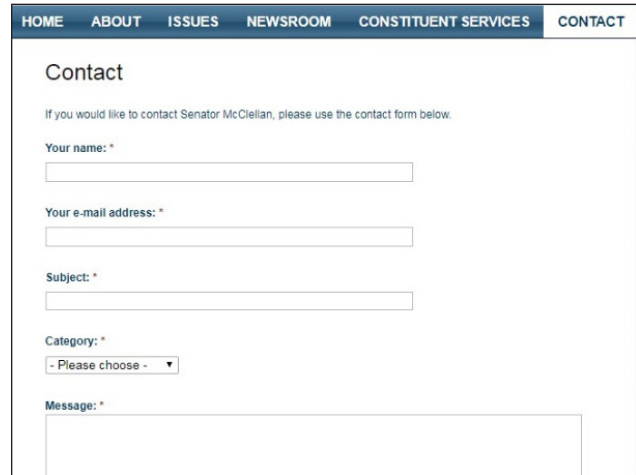
4. Be prepared to entertain any comments or questions that the Legislative Aide may have. You don't need to have all the answers; you can always direct the aide to Jonathan Yglesias, Public Policy Director at the Action Alliance ([info@vsdvalliance.org](mailto:info@vsdvalliance.org)), and let them know that he can serve as a legislative resource to their office on these issues.

## by letter

That's right! Good-old-fashioned letters through the mail. In the age of email and instant communication, writing real letters may feel outdated, but they can have much more impact on an office and the attention your message receives. There are hundreds of bills introduced each session, and many more individuals, businesses, and nonprofits contacting each member asking them to give attention to various issues. This means that email inboxes fill up quickly. A real letter on paper takes up physical space and is harder

to slip by the wayside. It's also more personal; emails are quick, but letters take more effort. And, if they receive multiple letters on the same issue, it can have a real impact!

If you don't have time to send a letter, many legislators have contact forms on their websites for constituents to leave feedback or comment on issues. Offices consistently tell us they pay attention to these messages, even if they don't have the capacity to respond to every message they receive.



The screenshot shows a contact form titled "Contact" with a navigation menu at the top containing "HOME", "ABOUT", "ISSUES", "NEWSROOM", "CONSTITUENT SERVICES", and "CONTACT". Below the title, it says "If you would like to contact Senator McClellan, please use the contact form below." The form has five main sections: "Your name: \*" with a text input field; "Your e-mail address: \*" with a text input field; "Subject: \*" with a text input field; "Category: \*" with a dropdown menu showing "- Please choose -"; and "Message: \*" with a large text area.

*This example of a legislator contact form is from Senator Jennifer McClellan's website.*

## social media

Most legislators use social media in some capacity, and it's a great way to further engage with them. This is especially true for a concentrated effort from supporters of an issue. Show legislators how much Virginians care about survivors and to tell them there are ways they can help!

Here are a few places to start:



**House Democrats** [twitter.com/VAHouseDems](https://twitter.com/VAHouseDems)  
**House Republicans** [twitter.com/VAGOPCaucus](https://twitter.com/VAGOPCaucus)  
**Senate Democrats** [twitter.com/VASenateDems](https://twitter.com/VASenateDems)  
**Senate Republicans** [twitter.com/VASenateGOP](https://twitter.com/VASenateGOP)

\*Note: not every legislator uses Twitter or Facebook, and some use neither.

The Action Alliance Twitter account ([twitter.com/VActionAlliance/lists/virginia-state-senators](https://twitter.com/VActionAlliance/lists/virginia-state-senators)) also maintains lists of members of the General Assembly for the House ([twitter.com/VActionAlliance/lists/virginia-delegates](https://twitter.com/VActionAlliance/lists/virginia-delegates)) and Senate ([twitter.com/VActionAlliance/lists/virginia-state-senators](https://twitter.com/VActionAlliance/lists/virginia-state-senators)).

## in-person meetings with legislators

In-person meetings are often the best way to make an impact. This is how you make your advocacy personal and build the most immediate connection with your legislators. Note that during the General Assembly (typically January-early March), the best time to schedule meetings is usually between 9:00 a.m. and 11:15 a.m. However, you may have a legislator that offers a meeting later in the day. Outside of the General Assembly Session, it's easier to get a meeting with your legislator, and you're more likely to get them in a more relaxed state, ready to listen and problem-solve with you.

## helpful tips for meeting with legislators

- 1) Check in with the member's front desk staff.** If you have business cards, have one ready to hand to staff when you arrive at your legislator's office. This helps them "announce you" and tell the legislator/staff who has arrived for a visit.
- 2) Don't be disappointed if you don't get to meet directly with your legislator.** The legislative assistants/aides (LAs) will take notes and pass your message on to their boss. LAs are often experts in certain policy issues (education, healthcare, etc.) and are sometimes the best person to speak to, since their boss depends on them to navigate the hundreds of bills introduced each session.
- 3) Decide in advance on your most important message or priority and lead with that.** Schedules are often very tight!
- 4) Thank the legislator and staff for meeting with you.**
- 5) Introduce yourself and where you live and/or work.** It is important for the legislator to know that you live/vote in their district OR serve people in their district. Many offices only want to speak with constituents. However, if you represent an agency which serves their constituents, that is a great way to demonstrate why these issues matter to their district.
- 6) If you are with a Sexual/Domestic Violence Agency, provide a brief description of your program and services.**
- 7) A great way to start discussions on issues is to simply ask, "How familiar are you with sexual and domestic violence issues?"** This can help guide what you share and establish rapport – they may already champion these issues, or they may not know much and look to you for education.
- 8) Tell your personal story.** Why are sexual and domestic violence important to you?
- 9) Be prepared for tough questions and try not to take them personally.** By asking those tough questions, legislators are often seeking information that will help them in the process. As advocates, we are bringing issues to their attention and possibly educating them, so tough questions may also be an opportunity to educate.
- 10) It is ok if you don't know the answer to their questions.** Thank them for the question and tell them you will get the information they asked for and get back to them. Action Alliance staff will help you follow up.
- 11) Thank them again for their time.** Encourage them to contact you if they have questions about any sexual and domestic violence issues that come up during session and let them know that the Action Alliance can be a legislative resource to their office.

# in-person meetings: frequently asked questions

## where and when can i get legislative advocacy materials (fact sheets, talking points, policy priorities, etc)?

Around Action Alliance Legislative Advocacy Day (usually held at the end of January every year), you can find links to access/download materials on the Action Alliance's Policy website page ([vsdvalliance.org](https://vsdvalliance.org)). If you don't find what you need there, contact the Action Alliance Public Policy Director ([info@vsdvalliance.org](mailto:info@vsdvalliance.org)).

## when should i start scheduling my meetings with legislators?

If you're advocating with the Action Alliance for our annual Legislative Advocacy Day, it's best to get on a legislator's calendar as soon as session starts (the second Wednesday of every January). We recommend you start calling to schedule your visits as soon as you are able!

Those who have scheduled meetings with legislators and their staff will have the opportunity to hold a 10-15-minute meeting to share your views on pending sexual and domestic violence legislation. Because the meetings are brief, it can be helpful to practice what you want to say and how to say it both concisely and powerfully.

## what if i am unable to get a scheduled meeting?

If you cannot schedule a meeting, you are encouraged to go by your Delegate and Senator's offices and speak briefly with their staff/legislative assistant. Everyone is encouraged to leave behind information on your local agency and the Action Alliance Policy Priority Summary.

## what do i need to bring to my meeting(s)?

You should bring information and materials about your community, your program services and stories that demonstrate the impact of your services.

## what should i wear and expect when visiting the capitol?

Dress is business attire. However, you will need to walk several blocks from public parking to the General Assembly Building so wear comfortable shoes.

Please bring your ID and be prepared to pass through a security screening and have your personal items screened by an x-ray machine prior to entry to the building. Please note that all packages and bags are subject to physical search.

**Note:** We also encourage you to visit your legislators at their district offices when they are not in session at the General Assembly (typically January-March); you can find the address of your legislators' district office on the Who's My Legislator webpage ([whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov/](https://whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov/)).

# following up & what's next?

Following up with your legislators is a great way to reinforce your initial message and to stay on their radar. It also gets counted as another registered contact from a concerned constituent or a community advocate on this issue!

Your method of follow-up may depend on your initial method of contact. If you called your legislator and spoke with a legislative aide or an office rep, it may be a good idea to send a follow up email to their office (you can find their email addresses here: [whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov](http://whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov)) and just mention who you spoke with, on what date, and about what topic/bill(s). Thank them for the conversation and ask that they continue to support survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence by acting on the topic and/or bill(s) that you discussed. You might also consider giving them a call back a few days later to thank them for the discussion and ask if the Delegate or Senator has agreed to support the bill/issue that you discussed.

Of course, you can always reach your legislator in a public forum through Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. A message via social media may be a particularly impactful way to register your thanks or to reinforce their needed support on a bill or issue.

**Here are a few ideas on what you can do on the other 364 days you aren't lobbying with us!**

- 1. If you work for a Sexual and Domestic Violence Agency, or have friends and family who know survivors, care about these issues, etc., consider hosting a letter writing party.** It can be a great way to make sure everyone takes the time to sit down and spend a few minutes crafting a thoughtful letter, and then you can make sure they all get mailed at once. Plus, it's a great excuse to get together, share food and drinks, and make advocacy into a community endeavor – especially for folks who might not otherwise have the time or interest in a formal advocacy day.
- 2. You can propose your own bill.** Ask your legislator to introduce your idea. This type of introduction is a “bill-by-request,” and should be presented in writing. A short description and some points will suffice.
- 3. The best time to have your voice heard is during General Assembly subcommittee or committee hearings.** Committee hearings are packed with media, members, and the press. If you can, make time to make statements in support or opposition of the bill you're tracking during the committee hearing!
- 4. Stay persistent.** Don't forget, every General Assembly member tracks who and how many contacts they get on any given bill. That means every call, letter, visit, e-mail, and even tweet is tallied, and they are paying attention; everything you do moves the needle!
- 5. Attend townhall meetings or district office hours.** Members often hold meetings for the public to reach them in person, in their district. Keep an eye on your members' social media or sign up for their district newsletters to know when they will be in town.
- 6. VOTE!** There is an election every year in Virginia (when you take into account primaries, general, state, and local elections)!



visit here to register to vote

[www.elections.virginia.gov/registration/how-to-register](http://www.elections.virginia.gov/registration/how-to-register)

# the Virginia General Assembly

## on how bills become laws

The process of introducing legislation to be considered by the General Assembly and ultimately enacted into law is one of the most important responsibilities of a Senator or a Delegate. The following outline depicts the general process for an idea to be considered and passed by the General Assembly, and approved by the Governor.

### creating a bill

- Bills may originate in either the Senate or the House of Delegates. Staff attorneys check existing law and the constitutionality of the proposed legislation.
- The member signs his/her name on the bill and introduces it.
- The bill is assigned to a Committee.
- The members of the Committee -in public session- study, discuss, and vote on the bill.
- The Committee then reports (“approves”) the bill, with or without amendments, to the originating body (Senate or House of Delegates).

### bill readings

- The Constitution requires that every bill have three readings on three calendar days.
- When passed, the bill is sent to the other house for its consideration.
- In the other body’s chamber: The bill goes through the same procedure as it did in the originating body.
- If there are differences between the Senate and House versions of the bill, a Committee of Conference is created to resolve them.

### signing a bill into law

- After the bill has been passed by both houses of the General Assembly, it is printed as an enrolled bill and examined and signed by the presiding officer of each house.
- The bill is sent to the Governor for approval, where the Governor may: 1) sign the bill into law; 2) amend the bill and return it to the General Assembly for approval; 3) veto the bill and return it to the General Assembly, where the House of Delegates and the Senate may override the veto by a two-thirds vote of both houses; or, 4) take no action and the bill becomes law without the Governor’s signature.

### new laws

- Bills enacted at a Regular Session are effective the first day of July, unless otherwise specified.
- Bills enacted at a Special Session (or Reconvened Session) are effective the first day of the fourth month following the adjournment of the Special Session, unless otherwise specified.

*Individually,*  
**we are**  
*one drop.*

*Together,*  
**we are**  
*an ocean.*

~ Ryunosuke Akutagawa



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